

A THOUSAND MILES OUT OF MY MIND

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The dissertation is a collection of creative and non-fiction work, including a novel with critical introduction, four short stories, and three essays. The novel is a modern day Grail quest that takes place primarily in the Southwestern United States. The short stories are mostly set in the southwest as well, and take for their topic what Paul Fussel refers to as “hope abridged.” The essays are non-fiction.

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Ronald Wallace asserts that “comedy has become the major characteristic form of the twentieth-century novel, a comedy which incorporates the violence and chaos of modern life” (Wallace 1). However, for this important literary form, the comic novel has received a surprising lack of attention from the critics. Louis Rubin states that “the industry and prodigality of modern-day American literary scholarship being what they are, it may seem strange that so little writing has been done on so vast a subject” (Rubin ix). One of the reasons for this may be, as Lionel Trilling has pointed out, “Nowadays, even the literate reader is likely to be unschooled in the comic tradition and unaware of comic seriousness” (Trilling 8). If, as seems to be the case, this is so, it goes a long way towards explaining another common misconception about comedy, one which many critics have pointed out. Specifically, there seems to be a general opinion among the scholars and the public alike that anything that is humorous is also frivolous and therefore unworthy of serious examination. Another opinion on this comes from Fred Miller Robinson, who finds that as a general rule, the “study of comedy is so often a method of categorization rather than analysis” (Robinson 2).

Dismissing the idea of the *l’humour noir*, as Andre Breton dubbed “black humor” in 1939, as humor at all, Bruce Janoff asserts that it is a tradition in which there is an “overwhelmingly tragic view of the world” and as such is aligned more closely with tragedy than humor (Janoff 18).

In Moby Dick, Ishmael states “There are certain queer times and occasions...when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke” (Melville 195). It is this sort of realization, of course, that spurs the attempts by writers to depict and therefore classify the predicament of modern man.

So, then, the modern comic novel may be said to deal with the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” with a comic irony and ambivalence that sometimes borders on, sometimes falls headlong into, despair. Wallace observes that “the modern comic novel rejects the idea of reformation through ridicule. Instead, laughter reflects a necessary comic perspective on man’s position in an absurd universe” (Wallace 15). Safer continues this line of reasoning by asserting that “Contemporary American epics ridicule those who relentlessly look for meaning in an absurd world...they present an absurd portrayal of the times, absurd in Camus’s view, which focuses on the ‘confrontation between the human need for meaning and the unreasonable silence of the world’.” (Safer 20).

Robert Coover states that, “I tend to think of tragedy as a kind of adolescent response to the universe—the higher truth is a comic response” (Hertzel 28). Shakespeare’s “Richard II,” dealing with, as Herschel Baker says, the “recording with indignation the course and outcome of a successful insurrection,” (Riverside 801) is a History play that concerns itself with the tragic results of *Realpolitik*. However, King Richard’s railing against circumstance strikes us as an example of exactly what Coover is trying to convey:

I'll give my jewels for a set of beads,  
My gorgeous palace for a hermitage,  
My gay apparel for an almsman's gown,  
My figu'rd goblets for a dish of wood,  
My scepter for a walking staff,  
My subjects for a pair of carved saints,"

One can almost see Aumerele and Northumberland--two of his staunchest supporters--looking at their watches and wishing he'd hurry up, so they could try to go save his kingdom, but no, he's just hit his stride and continues on:

"And my large kingdom for a little grave,  
A little, little grave, an obscure grave..."(Riverside 825).

In contrast to this is Yossarian's frequent, simple assertion in Catch-22 that the reason he doesn't want to fly any more bombing missions is because everyone's trying to kill him. R.W.B. Lewis suggests that the humor to be found in postmodern novels such as Catch-22, is an aesthetic experience of a paradox stated. He goes on to say that "the really significant development in the comic mode, both at home and abroad, over the past century or so has been the development of comedy as a way of registering artistic and human defeat, and the use of the clown figure as a means of living with despair. And yet, a note of something more than sheer endurance...a note even of positive joy..." (Robinson 15). Of course, Shakespeare's audience, steeped in the tradition of the Great Chain of Being, probably would not interpret Richard's speech as self-absorbed and immature, even though it is by his actions and inactions, that Bollingbroke has managed

to steal his throne. It would take over four hundred years before the philosophical climate would change enough for the common person to accept the idea that life is chaotic, confusing, and unfair and about as much time for this idea to make its way into literature.

When in Moby Dick Ishamel meets his bedmate Queequeg for the first time and decides that it is better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunk Christian, most readers cannot help but laugh. And though the novel is full of little comic gems like this, that doesn't make it a comic work, any more than the numerous detailed and accurate discourses on cetology make it a book that is dedicated to a study of whales and whaling.

Even while we laugh during the humorous passages of Catch-22 we know also that a war is being fought and that women will be raped and killed, Snowden will be eviscerated and bleed to death in front of Yossarian and that the men responsible for all this tragedy will not only go unpunished but will be honored and rewarded.

My novel, A Thousand Miles Out of my Mind, is a modern day Grail Quest. Some of Safer's observations on Catch-22 and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest may also be made about A Thousand Miles. "Like traditional epics, all the postmodern comic epic novels discussed are notably allusive. However these epics use materials from the past in a half-farcical, half passionate spirit. Their allusiveness mocks the present and is often ambivalent about the past (Safer 21). A Thousand Miles intentionally blends elements from several different genres in an attempt to draw on traditional values from our literary Western heritage and recast them in a comic, postmodern light. As such then, the Grail motif in the novel is intended to be viewed in the "half-farcical, half passionate spirit" that Safer identifies as the "inverse allusive mode."

The protagonist, Colin, performs the role of the untested youth. Finding himself alienated and alone, Colin steals a car and, unbeknownst to him, sets in motion a chain of events that will change his life. As is common with mythic literature such as *The Faerie Queene* and the Arthurian Grail Quests Colin finds himself lost, with no sense of direction, not even the direction from where he has come. He then has an encounter with a crone figure that is at once confusing and illuminatory. He will encounter the Old Woman several more times in the novel and each time Colin modifies his actions to fit what he thinks may be suggestions or clues from the Crone, even though her comments are almost always ambivalent. Thus, she operates as a type of guide for the quest, though her influence lies more in the fact her appearing spurs Colin to take some action, to be active in his choices rather than passive.

The transvestite, Julie, or J. as Colin chooses to call her, performs dual roles; on the one hand she is a Trickster figure who creates as many problems as she solves; on the other she is a type of *eiron* figure that Northrop Frye identifies in his essay "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy" a character who appears to be less than he is, or who assumes more guilt than necessary (Rath 252). Colin also functions in this capacity in a limited sense, most of which occurs at the end of the novel, where armed with a nascent sense of responsibility, he chooses to return home and face his family, as well as to attempt to correct the wrongs that he has done. There is also a sense at the end of the novel that a very different Colin will be returning from the "wasteland," of which I will speak more later, one who will also be willing and now capable of correcting the other wrongs that drove him from home in the first place.



In her book which explores the “mad” protagonist in modern literature, Inmates Running the Asylum, Barbara Tera Lupack makes the observation that “mad protagonists typically withdraw from society as they struggle to internalize issues of family, culture, history, and ultimately return (though somewhat circuitously) to effect some kind of social amelioration, a process that is a variation of the monomythic pattern of departure-imitation-return described by Joseph Campbell” (Lupack 6). She goes on to say that the protagonists of the novels of the forties and fifties, such as Saul Bellow’s Henderson, find their quest to be linear and progressive; they return from their withdrawal from society with a new understanding of that society and their place in it (Lupack 6). From the sixties on, though, the hero’s journey is usually more circular and the results less likely to be clear and useful and may, in fact, be undecipherable. Rather than a return to society as a type of Grail Knight who restores the wasteland, the post modern protagonist is more likely to “remain deluded to the end” (Wallace 5). Colin functions between the two extremes of the either or that Lupack offers. In one way his journey is “linear and progressive” in much the same way as Henderson’s is in Saul Bellow’s Henderson the Rain King. Unlike Henderson, though, whom we know at the end of the novel has clear sense of what changes he must make and also that he is capable of implementing them, whatever changes Colin has decided upon are at best vague and may very well be unattainable. However, the mere fact that he is willing to return to society and make an attempt is at least a start.

The action of the novel takes place on the road. On a whim, Colin has stolen a classic Corvette and left Dallas with the vague intention of going to Oregon to see his

grandparents. It is not until much later in the novel that the impossibility of this is made known to the reader, but even so, it still doesn't quite ring true. Colin's parents do not seem to exercise any real control over him, nor do they seem particularly interested in trying to do so. If he wanted to go see his grandparents, or anyone else for that matter, he hardly needs to steal a car to do so. Indeed, though he constantly abuses his stepfather's money, good will, and trust, Ralph (or Gianfranco as he wishes to be called) comes across as being far removed from the evil stepparent usually found in myth and Faerie tale. In actuality, Ralph/Gianfranco comes across as one of the more sympathetic characters in the novel, one who is more sinned against than sinning. There are numerous instances where his actions, though a constant source of suspicion for Colin, seem intended to protect and shelter Colin rather than hurt him. In point of fact, if there is anything for which he might be faulted, it is for being too patient with Colin. By the same token, of course, heroic literature abounds with rulers who are constantly embarrassed, endangered, or otherwise compromised by their subjects. There is not a single instance in the novel where Ralph/Gianfranco does anything other than fulfill his role as protector and even, one senses, sanctuary for Colin.

As such then, Colin's flight from Dallas is more an attempted flight from himself and his quest, then, becomes one of self-discovery. Although he and J. and later Max drive all over the country in their erratic journey toward Graceland, Colin's true path in reality lies inward.

When the Crone first appears to Colin, he is in the wilderness of New Mexico. He has lost his way in a fog and while trying to ascertain which way to go, she appears

out of the mist, and asks him to give her a ride. There is a basic goodness in Colin that keeps the character from being insufferable and it is from the goodness and desire to help that he agrees. They ride along in silence for awhile, at which point she directs him to stop. The reader finds out at this point that Colin has passed a test of sorts, and so the Crone decides to help him. Directing him to forget Oregon, she disappears back into the mist, leaving Colin alone and confused, but also psychologically ready to begin his quest proper.

Colin first encounters the Trickster figure, J., in a café in a small town in Arizona. As with the Red Cross Knight in *The Faerie Queene*, he is deluded by lust into going with her. Luckily for Colin though, in this manifestation the Trickster proves to be friendly. Of course on the narrative level, J. acts out of self-interest and little more. J.'s desire to go to Graceland is a type of pilgrimage and he/she is willing to sacrifice the wishes of Colin to realize that end. However, as the novel progresses a genuine fondness develops between Colin and J. until her journey, though never exactly his, becomes the vehicle through which his quest manifests itself and is subsequently fulfilled.

After J. in effect kidnaps Colin, she reveals her plan to go to Graceland and in so doing reverses the direction in which he was heading. J. understands what is required to realize her vision of paying homage to Elvis Presley and in effect her strength becomes Colin's strength.

On the road the pair encounter a series of characters who mostly fall into what Aristotle called the *agroikos* or churl category (Lupack 252) and who, directly or indirectly, seek to hinder J. and Colin from their quest. These encounters become, in

effect, a series of trials that the pair must succeed in and which have the cumulative effect of strengthening both their abilities and their resolve. The one adversary they cannot overcome, Max, becomes enchanted by the purity of their collective vision and becomes a resourceful ally and companion. Max serves to highlight the bond that has formed between J. and Colin and it is through the influence she exerts on both of them that their friendship is cemented.

The quest motif is particularly present and modernized in the characters of Colin and Max and they perform on another, allegorical level as psychic representatives of the Wasteland. Though it is true that most of the action of the novel transpires in the actual wilderness, the successful completion of the quest will not result in reinvigoration of the actual land. Rather, the wasteland motif is most obviously realized in the hearts of both Colin and Max and success will be most evident in a revitalization of the spirit. The emptiness that is evident in Colin is most evident in the dream sequences that occur four times in the novel. Though seemingly unrelated and little more than an example of what Harry Berger (Berger 93) describes as conspicuous irrelevance, they serve to underscore a malaise of spirit in the protagonist and highlight his deep ambivalence towards life. Death and isolation prove to be the unifying themes in the dream sequences and it is only Colin's immaturity and lack of introspection that serve as a buffer between the dreams and any conscious apprehension he might otherwise have of them. Max, on the other hand, is old before her time. Hers is more a world- weariness brought on by alcoholism, bad relationships, and a life of crime. While it is true that when we first encounter her in the novel, she seems more or less content, her façade is soon proven to be no match for

the truth of the road, and her true vulnerability and fragility soon begin to surface. Max, who never discovers J.'s true gender, nevertheless falls in love with her, and decides that she will try to make what is to her an impossible situation work. As such then, Max is drawn into the internal quest-logic that has controlled the novel from the start. Her feelings for J. are in fact a test, even though she is unaware of it. In effect, she is faced with the same choice as Huck Finn is when he is wrestling with what he has been told is right as opposed to what he knows in his heart to be right. And, just as Huck decides that he'd rather go to Hell than betray Jim, so also Max chooses to be true to her feelings. As for J., the decision not to reveal to Max that she is, in actuality, a man is a deliberate choice on her part and serves as proof that Max's love is genuine. Of the three characters, J. is the most complete, although she also presents a carefully constructed front behind which she can hide. But her physical abilities, as well as her unwavering commitment to seeing Graceland, serves to keep the action of the novel going.

By the end of the novel the three characters have bonded fully. Colin, in giving J. and Max the key which enable them to access Ralph/Gianfranco's money at the airport is more than a frivolous gesture involving someone else's money. He has matured to the point where he is willing to make a sacrificial gesture that he will not only not benefit from, but also which he knows will cost him dearly, as he must return to the society that he initially rejected, and attempt to live within its constraints.

## A THOUSAND MILES OUT OF MY MIND

### Chapter 1

I was driving west down I-30, leaving hearth and kin, as it were, after a lengthy stay of, well, all my life. I was also in what was, from a certain point of view, a stolen Corvette, circa 1966. I really don't know what made up my mind about either the car or the prodigal sojourn from town. It may have been nothing more than the lure of screaming down a two lane blacktop, top down, radio up while eight oversized pistons pounded the remains of prehistoric plants and animals into raw energy, transforming the center stripe into one long, uninterrupted, golden ribbon. It may have been my short and dismal return to the university where, via a note, my advisor informed me that I was "lucky that the Viet-Nam conflict is over..." and suggested that I seek a trade, like manual labor.

Mostly though, I think it was my stepfather, who kept insisting that I and everyone else call him "Gianfranco," instead of Ralph, like his parents intended.

The car's ignition had worn down over the years and as the car surged over a low bump in the road, the key slipped out of the switch, hit my knee and bounced to the floor. I absently fished around for the it, found it and put it back in the switch. The car would run without it, but I felt better with it where it belonged. Everything has a place in this world, and that key was no exception.

My thoughts drifted back over the past few hours, towards home and Ralph and to how exactly I'd come to be in possession of this Corvette.

Things had seemed normal enough--we were having one of our mid-week explosions and I was pissed off. Ralph's tantrums always have to do with his image. In brief, the man's whole *raison d'etre* revolves around a single theme: himself. He and my mother had married a couple of years before, right after my dad died. As I saw it, living with my mother and a larger than life ego with motor skills, she'd certainly traded down. We were in his new car, a huge land-yacht from Germany that probably cost enough to keep a moderate sized republic in Africa fed for a year and he was whining at me about my continued use of his name (Ralph) instead of his adopted alias (Gianfranco). My argument--specifically that I called him by his name because it was his name--was, as usual, summarily dismissed. I think that he honestly believes that eventually everyone will know and love him by the name of Gianfranco. I think he's living in denial.

At the time of our exchange I was riding with him to his office because Mom's car was down and mine had been totaled, all of which had been accomplished in the space of nine, short, alcohol-fueled-and-inspired hours the previous week. My plans during this orgy of mechanical violence had included his car also, but I was unable to find it, owing partly to the condition of my faculties, a problem which was aggravated by my being at the wrong house, on the wrong street and--in all candor, I must confess--in the wrong suburb. An honorable attempt was made all the same, using a surrogate Mercedes that resembled Ralph's car, but that's a different story entirely. As it fell out though, the Sun of Fortune had been shining favorably on me all along, or I wouldn't have been driving

Ralph to work at his company, Transcontinental Conglomerate Inc., which is really just a nationwide chain of video rental stores.

On the way to his office, we passed Classic Cars of North Dallas, and there, sitting in a pool of light I saw God in one of his million manifestations, this one being candy-apple red. I tuned Ralph out as he explained for the fifteen millionth time why it was unthinkable to undermine the cultivation of an image of vitality and importance by answering to a name as plebeian as Ralph. I craned my neck around to stare at the car and absently muttered "Uh-huh," as the words "PURE SEX" flashed in my mind like a portable billboard in front of a strip joint. Ralph dropped his tirade quicker than usual, mainly because I think he mistook my silent, materialistically-induced contemplation for acquiescence.



## Chapter 2

At Ralph's office I got behind the wheel of \$65,000 worth of my stepfather's ego and assured him that I was going straight home. I never spoke a truer word. I went straight to Classic Cars. The salesman jumped to his feet a little too quickly and met me at the door. Ralph once told me that if you are going to sell something, anything, and expect to get your price, you've got to act as if you couldn't care less how things turn out. The salesman, though, didn't subscribe to that philosophy. But I do. I found that the same rule applies to Grand Theft Auto.

I put on my best spoiled college kid act (which wasn't too hard as I'd had seven years to hone my technique) and explained my problem to the salesman. I told him that I'd been driving this boat around for the past six weeks and was thinking about trading it in on something a little more practical, like say that bright red convertible Corvette with the enormous 327 V-8, leather interior, and every other option known to God and man in the Year of Our Lord, 1966. He said he understood, but that ordinarily they didn't take trade-in's that were worth more than the vehicle they were selling. I said that from where I was standing, the Corvette and the Mercedes looked to be about equal in value, if one took into account such variables as top speed, wind resistance, ease of parking, and the overall historical context, all of which were heavily weighted in the Corvette's favor. The salesman nodded, but before he could say anything, the phone in Ralph's car rang. I excused myself, got in the car, rolled up the window, and answered.

"Hello?" I said.

"Colin?" Ralph asked.

"Ralph?" Riposte mine, missing nary a beat.

"You home yet?"

"Just entering the last stretch. There's Mrs. Wilson's cat still stretched out on the street. I figured the Sanitation Department would have been out by--"

"Colin, shut-up. Look and see if my billfold is in the glovebox."

I looked in the center console first, more on principle than any expectation of finding it. It wasn't there, so I checked the glovebox and sure enough, there was the object in question, a three-inch-by-five-inch piece of Ralph's wardrobe that had cost an alligator its life.

"Yeah, it's here," I answered.

Ralph sighed. "Good. I need you to bring it back up here. It's got all my credit cards in it. I need them for lunch."

This was an interesting new development.

"Sure thing, Gianfranco."

A brief perusal of the wallet's contents yielded an inventory of one key to the locker Ralph kept at the airport, six Visa and/or Mastercards, two Mpack cards and one American Express, Platinum. Definitely an interesting new development. I got out of the car and addressed the salesman.

"That was my old man. He wants me to quit screwing around up here and bring the car to his office. He said if you didn't mind, to just leave the Benz as collateral, and that if you did mind, to blow it off and he'd talk to a friend of his in Houston."

"Well, ordinarily company policy dictates that a salesman accompany the prospective customer on the test drive to, ah, answer any questions he might have, but I don't see why we can't accommodate your father." He didn't look very happy.

"Great! Keys?" I asked.

"Yes. Of course. A minute," he said mechanically.

He came back with the keys and I explained that my dad was an idiot about buying cars because he didn't know the first thing about them, so if it was okay, we would keep it overnight so that our mechanic could look it over. He seemed a little hesitant until I suggested that he call the police and have them verify that the Mercedes was ours. About that time a manager wandered over, asked what was going on and when we told him he said calling the police wouldn't be necessary. I got back into the Mercedes, got the wallet and my sunglasses. I opened the glove-box to see if there was anything interesting in there and found an unopened envelope from Diamond Shamrock. On closer inspection it proved to contain a Diamond Shamrock Platinum card. I figured it might come in handy, especially since Ralph probably didn't know he had it. Then I called Ralph to explain that I'd be a little late because I'd had a flat and the guy at the auto club said it'd be an hour or so before he could get to me.

Ralph was a little put out, but I apologized profusely and hung up. I got out of the car, taking most of the car phone with me. The last time I saw the salesman was in the rearview mirror as he stood at the edge of the parking lot, watching God and me drive off.

### Chapter 3

My first official act, after committing Grand Theft Auto, was to add embezzlement to my ever-growing resume of felonies. I stopped at the first Mpack machine I saw and punched in the access code that Ralph had thoughtfully penciled on the card's slip cover. "Access denied." I thought about it for a minute and reversed the sequence. Bingo. Sneaky sneaky. Good thing the card didn't fall into the wrong hands, they'd probably have gotten it right the first time. I took a peek at Ralph's checking account and was delighted to see that he had a little over \$10,000 available for immediate gratification, though according to the machine I could only withdraw \$300.00 per transaction. I thought about going into to the bank and trying to get it all at once, but figured there was no way in the world that'd work without their calling Ralph, so I resigned myself to frenetic driving all over town and acquiring a callous on my index finger.

After hitting about ninety-seven machines I had all \$10,000 in twenties and a healthy dose of paranoia. The only thing I hadn't done was raid his locker at the airport. That had to count for something. I even thought about returning the car and giving Ralph his money back and maybe I should have, tough at the time it didn't seem so simple. I'd to call the bank and impersonate Ralph to make them release the money. It seems all the activity on that account made them suspicious. I explained that as I had earned the money and chosen to deposit it in their bank that I felt what I did with it and how I chose to do

whatever I did with it was my concern and not theirs. The clerk told me she thought it was irresponsible and hung up, though not before I made her promise to approve all the upcoming withdrawals.

Ralph had underestimated my involvement with his company. I didn't have a regular position, because while Ralph wanted me to work so that I wouldn't be spoiled, at the same time his ego couldn't bear the weight of having a stepson who worked side by side with his employees. Mostly, I just sort of hung around and talked to everybody. Thus, I decided that my real function was as sort of a goodwill ambassador between Ralph and everyone else. As liaison between the two entities, I felt it was my duty to disseminate and receive information, as well as do what I could to help ease tensions at the office to make it a better place to work.

One of my ideas in that area was "Memorandum 13," which I dreamed up and implemented from Ralph's personal terminal in his office. It didn't really mean anything. Memorandum 13 was a form memo that read: "Until further notice, all operations will continue as before but must be approved by this office. Gianfranco, President." Naturally, this caused no end of confusion, and slowed down whatever project it was thrown into by a good six days. Let's say that Betty, Ralph's secretary, needed to go somewhere for the week-end, but also had a big job to complete. Instead of having to rearrange her plans, all she had to do was drop Memo 13 into her "To Do" box, then go ask Ralph what the deal was. When questioned, Ralph, afraid of admitting he had no idea, always took credit for putting the memo in there. Then she would bring everything she was working on and give to Ralph, who would then keep it for awhile before "approving" it. It was a nice set-up.

Gradually, useful information began to trickle back to me, usually in the form of questions, about goings on at the office. One such question read: "Why does your stepfather keep so much dollars in a locker at the airport?" That one came from Ernesto in accounting, seemed like a good question, so I checked it out.

The answer, like so many that deal with Ralph, was simple-- he'd seen some gangster flick one time where the hero's survival depended on getting to some money he'd stashed in an airport. To Ralph it looked like a good idea. Made sense to me too, especially now.

I put all the cash I had taken from the bank accounts into a grocery sack, but decided to leave the money at the airport alone. Then I went to Northpark Mall where I walked around for a little while, trying to figure out what I should do next. I went into Talbot's and put twenty-dollar bills in the pockets of ten or fifteen dresses. I bought everybody's breakfast at La Madeleine. I checked the bridal register at Dillard's and sent knife sharpeners to everyone listed. Instead of perking up, I was blue and getting bluer. When Vanna, the manager at La Madeleine, refused to give me forty dollars worth of dimes for the wishing well I decided it was time to leave the city for a day or two.

On my way out I passed a Banana Republic store and then turned around and walked back in. Every piece of clothing the urban adventurer could possibly need was in there. A salesgirl walked up and asked if she could help.

"Sure," I said.

"What are you looking for today? We have a sale..." I cut her off.

"It's my birthday and my parents are in New Zealand doing environmental work..."

"How neat!" she interrupted.

"Yeah. Well, anyway, they called to say that there was some problem with the gorilla's being poached or some kind of rare eggs being stolen--I forget which--and they couldn't make it home for my birthday." I looked at her closely. She seemed to be buying all of this so far. I don't know why I was lying to her, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

"I'm sorry," she said. She wasn't a bad liar herself. I liked her.

"So, they told me to come here and buy a bunch of clothes and stuff. And here I am, the dutiful son."

She laughed. "Well, we have all of our summer shirts on sale--"

"They expressly forbid me to buy anything on sale."

She looked a little confused, but recovered quickly. "No problem. Right this way."

I don't know if she was a good salesperson, or if I honestly thought I'd need all that stuff but by the time Ralph was, unknowingly, ready to pay up, a small crowd had gathered to watch. There were shirts and pants and socks and boots and belts strewn all over the counter. A compass. There were things I don't remember picking out and things I knew no name for. It was cool. She totaled it out and the register showed \$2517.59. Her eyes widened in shock. As more of a reflexive gesture than serious question, she asked if there would be anything else. I started to say no, but then remembered the small mountain



of cash I had stowed away in the grocery bag. I asked if they had any money belts and someone behind me rather rudely suggested that was one thing I probably wouldn't need. Impulsively I pulled most of the transaction slips I'd gotten from the teller machines out of my hip pocket and asked him to hold them; they looked like a small phone book. She said that, yeah, they had money belts, but when she brought it, the tag said it'd only hold \$500.00, in twenties. It wasn't big enough, so I bought two. Then I looked over the counter and saw a big duffle bag.

"Give me one of those," I said. I looked over my shoulder for the guy who had all my receipts, but he was gone. She totaled it again and I gave her one of Ralph's credit cards. She ran it through the machine, it cleared and I signed the ticket.

"Come back soon, Ralph," she said. The store manager carried everything out to my car, and told me I'd made his whole month. He was a very happy man.

Well, I aim to please.

## Chapter 4

I cruised down the expressway soaking in the sun and the envious stares from the young execs in their B.M.W.'s, Infiniti's, and Lexi, men and women headed full tilt into maximum credit extension, double mortgages, and a life of anxiety and disappointment. Dead fish behind tinted glass. I sometimes wonder if those cars come with a steering wheel. The roadside shops were not a distraction until I noticed one named "Condoms To Go." Condoms To Go? Am I missing something? I imagined myself walking in, making my selections and then being asked by the salesman or salesgirl, "Will that be to go?" Oh dear. The implications were, shall we say, enormous. After that I spotted a billboard picturing some guy named "Father Amoco" who was peddling low cost insurance and dressed like a clergyman. Then another billboard with a guy selling furniture and who was obviously on methamphetamine when the picture was taken. I kept going.

By now, my immediate destiny had taken shape--albeit an abstract one--in my mind. This led directly to my next stop at Bill's Record Store where I charged a few hundred dollars worth of tapes, from Otis Redding to The Gourds, to some band called The Brent Mitchell Group and some others I hadn't heard of. I figured that would just about cover the whole emotional spectrum that I would undergo in what I decided was the only justification for breaking loose in such an obscenely stupid and clearly futile way. Mission: A cross country drive towards my Grandparent's house in Oregon in search of

the perfect road trip. So, I pointed my newly acquired *modus mechanicus* due west and floored it.

But as with many journeys that begin with a painful first step, my quest was delayed by obstacles from the start. About half way between Dallas and Fort Worth, the Highway Department decided to shut west bound I-30 down from four lanes to about three quarters of one lane, creating a traffic jam that looked as if it might stretch into the next century. The top speed was about twelve-and-a-half miles per hour. This was going to take a long, long time. I turned the radio on, but the first station I chose had some senator or representative or something named Billy Stan Freeburgh howling about immorality and indecency and, as far as I could tell, everything else America stands for.

"The Devil's taken a seat in the House!" He cried. "It's time we jumped up and stamped him out."

I agreed and changed the station.

His tirade continued. "Send me some of your money so I can send that old Devil back to the pit where he belongs. Make him stop hasslin' decent folk!"

I looked at the radio to make sure I'd punched a different button and yes, I had. I changed to another station and then another. Between station changes the words I missed in his diatribe didn't amount to one short sentence. I switched to AM Billy Stan Freeburgh's voice resumed the assault, seemingly un-weakened by the loss of high fidelity stereo, though maybe it was a tad flatter. It was like he was preaching from inside a tin can.

It turns out that he'd managed to coerce his public into coming up with enough money to buy simultaneous air time on every radio station, AM and FM, for a two hour harangue at the American people. I had to admire his style, though; that's a lot of money.

I put in a tape, turned up the volume and began enjoying the view. I crept past Six Flags amusement park and remembered all the fun I used to have when my dad took me there. I could tell already this trip was going to do me good. If they'd just open up about twelve more lanes.

I finally got out to Forth Worth and then past Weatherford in exactly five hours and fifteen minutes. The highway was still shut down to one lane, ostensibly for purposes of repair, but I never saw one work crew. Just eight million cones separating me and the other drivers from those other two lanes that would lead to me the promised land, or somewhere close.

Getting fed up with pointlessly obeying a needless intrusion on my happiness, I pulled between two cones and into the closed off area. I'd just gotten the Vette up to cruising speed, passing the landlocked cars and all that when a near disaster struck. A large square of highwayless highway was looming on the horizon. The Texas Department of Highways had removed what looked to be about a thirty foot long chunk of road. Thoughtful. I stood on the brakes and slid to a stop right in front of it, and there it was. A huge square of concrete gone, cut clean and straight, as if with a knife, five or six car lengths long, two feet deep and all the way across the lanes I was in. The stream of cars to my right honked and people jeered. It was another hour until some kind soul stopped and let me in back in.

Chastened, I drove slowly and noticed how the landscape changed. The cars were starting to thin out, so I had a chance to take a break from screaming at everybody and look around. The greenness and humidity of north Texas faded out to the drier, yellow climate of the west, and as the soil bloomed gradually from black to red, the variety of trees dwindled to Mesquite and not much else and whose stunted, bush-like proportions stretched as far as the eye could see; from grassy, rolling bumps, to flat aridity. This began gradually at first, and then faster and faster, until all there was to see was sandy dirt, Mesquite trees, cactus and the occasional tumbleweed, as it rolled brazenly across the highway.

I kept driving, and eventually the Highway Department relinquished another lane, bringing the total count up to two. The Vette was getting terrible mileage, and I stopped for gas at a Diamond Shamrock, the versatility of which impressed me to no end. I wandered around inside in a sort of daze. I'd never really paid that much attention to how far gas station technology had pushed the envelope. I could live in one of those stations. Food, drinks, magazines, postcards, even clothes--after a fashion--were all available in quantity. A sign read: "Every thing you need to customize your vehicle." They even had gas and oil. I vowed to stop at them often and I did, sometimes for nothing at all, just to look around. They all had signs on their gas pumps stating that "Anything in the store may be purchased with your Diamond Shamrock card," and I was eager to do so.

The hundred-mile-long traffic jam and the attendant problems it created had really slowed me down. But beside my newfound glee in discovering Diamond Shamrock, it

was *nada*. One thing I was certain of was though I didn't know exactly where I was, I was way ahead of schedule.

Night fell, but I kept going. I had enough new clothes with me to stock a small store and I had a new car. Life was good. One thing that struck me was how accurate some of those old movies are. I remember watching old Cary Grant, or old Anybody movies, and that I used to make a big deal about how, when they were driving, you could tell it was a movie because of the way the road looked through the rear window. It always looks like a couple of people sitting on a couch making clever conversation while all this scenery falls away behind them into the distance. But as I drove I happened to look in the rear-view mirror and there it was, just like the movies, scenery blasting past while the road weaved back and forth in the middle. I always thought the color was a dead give away also, but that night, driving from nothing to nowhere while a full moon howled down on me the color was the color of the movies; perfect. Maybe it's always a full moon in the movies.

Somewhere out there, I got the idea to try to touch an eighteen-wheeler as I passed it. I was coming up on one, so I whipped over in the right lane and slowed down enough so that I was barely driving faster the truck. Getting the Vette as close to it as I dared, which was tricky because we were both drifting a little in our lanes, I reached out and just barely brushed the side of the trailer with my fingertips.

It felt like an electric shock went though my arm, and at first I thought I'd been injured. I looked at my hand as if I'd never seen it never before. The truck had been like a live animal under my hand.

It may not have been the wisest thing I've ever done, but for the rest of that night it's how I occupied myself, driving along, counting coup on the highway.

About 10:00 P.M. I stopped at a Diamond Shamrock truck-stop in Ranger and filled up, got some coffee, a box of chocolate doughnuts and, as the night was getting chilly, pulled a safari-jacket out of the heap. I got back to the road and drove, letting my mind wander, jamming along on auto-pilot, and the small hours crept by.

## Chapter 5

I knew I was getting farther from civilization because the road kills kept getting bigger and bigger. In the old days when cartographers hit the end of their leash and inscribed "Here be Dragons," they weren't entirely mistaken. I'd just swerved to miss an unidentifiable mass of grease and hair when "The Vacationers" got in front of me again. I'd first encountered them in the traffic jam where, inexplicably, they'd managed to inch past me. Now, for nearly two hundred miles, they had been my punishment, my gadflies, my Harpies in a stationwagon, always drifting into the lane I wanted, slowing down for every corner, bush, bridge, tree, fence, you-name-it, and keeping me within a mile or two below the speed limit. As we came to towns or gas stations I would floor it and get around them or they would pull over and stop to gape, and I would drive for all I was worth, but within an hour or so, after I'd stopped for gas or coffee, I'd look up in time to see them flummoxing down the road, ahead of me again. Some people spend their lives looking for truth or beauty, and these are noble pursuits, but if I could find a person who could explain to me how those who drive slower than everyone always end up in front, I'd be content to stay and learn wisdom.

As it was, I didn't find anyone to explain the mystery to me. Somewhere in the night I took a wrong turn and after several hours of oblivious driving I got to Van Horn, Texas. There was a little mexican restaurant and since I was hungry I went in. The place seemed to be empty and as I waited I noticed a mural on the wall. It was of the outside of



the restaurant and featured John Madden, a big bus and what would amount to about a 3500 foot tall Jesus Christ. I decided I wasn't quite that hungry.

I got back in the car and outside of town I saw a road sign that read, "El Paso, 115 miles."

El Paso. Name sounded nostalgic. I seemed to remember taking a family trip years before that included doing some time there. I pulled off the road and thought it over. Since it was on the road I was on I decided to head on that way. Some guy in a jeep blasted by about six inches from the car and flipped me off. Nice part of the world. I looked up and down the highway and, seeing no other traffic for five or six hundred miles, eased off the shoulder and headed in the direction the arrow on the sign pointed.

Within three miles of the sign there was no trace of anything except dirt and rocks. All indications suggested that when the settlers rolled through here they missed this place entirely.

Rounding a corner I passed a fenced-in field that was lit up in brutal detail by huge klieg lights. There were about twenty or thirty ostriches running around in it. I slowed down to get a better look and finally stopped entirely. These enormous birds would race to one end of the field and when they could go no farther, would stop, turn and tear *en masse* to the other end. I found this most perplexing. They seemed particularly intent on avoiding a bunch of bright orange scarecrows that were interspersed throughout the field. Scarecrows. It seemed slightly bizarre to coop a bunch of Volkswagen sized birds up with an apparatus used for centuries to terrorize them. I slammed the car back into gear and drove, intent on putting distance between myself and the birds. Scarecrows

and ostriches are a dangerous mix, and I had no desire to be around when the last straw broke and a bunch of deeply disturbed, twelve hundred pound birds came flapping and howling over the wire.

I was exhausted but determined to make it to El Paso. My head felt like it weighed a couple of a hundred pounds and the muscles in my neck were cramped up tight. My eyelids assumed an agenda of their own, opening and closing involuntarily and, in short, refusing to behave. Still El Paso loomed somewhere out there in the distance and I tried to keep going by telling myself how good a hot shower and a big, air conditioned room would be for my well-being. My eyelids still wouldn't behave so I compromised, shutting one for a few moments, then the other, until I drifted off to sleep, off the road and into a flat spin that jerked me suddenly and completely into screaming consciousness. I pounded on the brakes and gripped the steering wheel that was as useless as a rudder on a spaceship while the Corvette bucked and pitched to a stop. I looked around but could see nothing and slowly faded off to sleep.

## Chapter 6

Funny thing about summer in the desert, "the rosy-fingered dawn" doesn't creep from its bed gradually, it vaults into the sky with the fervor of a newly ordained Jesuit. One minute you're driving along, eyes glued to the tunnel created by your headlights, then bam!, the sun pops up from behind a clump of rocks like a bandito while your brain frantically tries to twist your pupils shut before the inside of your head gets sunburned. So for the rest of the day, whenever you close your eyes for a moment, you see two miniature black suns swimming around the backside of your eyelids.

Of course I don't sleep with my eyes open, so it wasn't a problem this time. I got out of the car and appraised the situation. All things considered, I couldn't have chosen a better place to run off the highway. The land was flat and dry. The car seemed in good shape, though I was stiff from the previous night's drive. My hands stung when I flexed them and when I looked I could see that the little creases on the backs of my knuckles were sunburned.

I got in the Vette and started it. A couple hundred yards of barbed wire fence pointed in a straight line from the front of the car back to the highway. I had a little trouble with it, but I finally pulled the wire loose and followed the trail I'd blazed the night before.

Back on the road I looked the car over from stem to stern and the only damage I could find was a few scratches and the occasional tuft of vegetation protruding from the

undercarriage. I drove for an hour, but I was hot and thirsty and couldn't remember the last Diamond Shamrock I'd passed, so when I saw the rest stop I pulled in.

There was nothing special about it, but it offered shade and had a water hose and a bathroom, all of which I availed myself of. I drank some of the water and then stripped down to my boxers, hosed myself down and scrubbed the grit off with my shirt. While I dried I rinsed off the car, then changed into some clean clothes. I felt clean and waterlogged so I stretched out on one of the concrete tables for a nap that wound up lasting the whole day.

Around 5:00 P.M., fully rested and ready to get going I started the Vette up and pulled onto the highway, headed west.

Nightfall found me entering the small town of Alpine, and I stopped at a Diamond Shamrock, filled up, bought two or three packets of No-Doz, some mints, a can of Wolf Brand chili and asked for a motel.

And because of my sins they told me where to find one.

## Chapter 7

I walked into the lobby and asked the night manager for a room. He eyed me suspiciously and asked if I wanted a single or a double.

"Oh, I'm single but I'm sleeping double." I admit it, I was feeling a bit giddy. He looked at me and curled his lip back over a couple of his front teeth, which were yellowed and tobacco stained. I decided to amend my remark.

"Whatever you've got will be fine."

"This is America, boy. Men fought and died so people like you could have a choice. Now, what you want?" He asked as if he doubted I knew.

"Give me a single, then."

He looked at me coldly for a moment and after he didn't make any move towards the key rack. I asked, "A double?"

"Man wants a double, the man gets a double." He went about the business of filling out the various forms, waivers, and what have you, and I looked over the assortment of postcards that were in a rack by the counter. They all said things like "Visit Historic Lubbock," or "I Left my Heart in San Antone."

I kept looking but never saw anything that even remotely hinted at the existence of Alpine.

"How many of them postcards you want?"

"Oh, uh two, I guess," and when this was met with disapproval, "four or five." He nodded in agreement. I picked out five postcards. Two Austin's, one San Antonio, Amarillo, and Lubbock. On my way out the door I was struck with a thought.

"You don't happen to own any ostriches, do you?" He looked at me as if I had just calmly walked in and suggested that we drive up to the capitol and kidnap the Governor. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders. "Didn't think so."

## Chapter 8

The only thing that the motel had going for it was a bar. Sort of. At any rate, they did serve drinks and for the small fee of four dollars and fifty cents, I became a lifetime club member, entitled to all the rights and privileges thereunto entailed. Exactly what the rights and privileges were or are was never fully explained to me. If I had to make a guess, though, I would think, for me at least, that the r's and p's basically were the right to sit in a strange town and enjoy the privilege of drinking with even stranger people. All my life if so desired. I got a table away from the other patients and after the waitress had taken my drink order, began a quick review of the last forty-eight or so hours. I'd stolen a car, either the Mercedes or the Corvette, depending on who you asked, drained my stepfather's bank account and driven close to seven hundred miles on the first leg of a cross country trip to somewhere.

I tried, but couldn't remember the last time I saw my grandparents. It hadn't occurred to me before, but I had no idea how to find their old place if, and when, I got there. This was problematic. I called the waitress back and told her to bring me the "New Drink" that, according to a hand-lettered sign hanging at an angle behind the bar, they were "proud to serve." The sign looked like one of those ransom notes that are cut out of all kinds of different magazines and pasted together; no two letters were alike either in size or color. She brought it over and I could feel the blood rising in my face from embarrassment. It was in a huge vase-shaped glass and was about fourteen different

colors. An umbrella was stuck into the top of it for purposes of humiliation. Everyone was staring from me to the drink and back to me. Conversation ceased and an air of expectation settled over the crowd. I took a sip and everyone kept watching, waiting for my reaction. A baby started to cry but was swiftly silenced. It really wasn't a bad cocktail at all, and taking another sip, I settled back into my chair. When I didn't fall into convulsions, or something similar to portend death, or at least blindness, most everyone went back to their business. A few persisted in staring a little longer, hoping for a delayed reaction I guess, but they finally gave up also. My waitress was still hanging around, so I asked what all the attention from the crowd was for.

"Oh, they just wanted to see what you'd do."

I didn't quite follow and conveyed this to her.

"Well, you're the first person to try one of those things."

"Uh-huh. Well, I hope no one was disappointed."

The waitress took me at my word and hurried to assure me that no feelings had been hurt.

"It's just that it's such a funny lookin' drink and most a the reglars is callin' it the Fag Detector on account a its bein' so..." She stopped abruptly when she realized the magnitude of her *faux pas*. "I didn't, uh, I shouldn't a said that and I didn't mean that orderin' that makes you a queer or nothin'..."

I tuned her out. She finally shut-up and I told her it was okay. I asked her when last call was, and she said midnight. I sat around drinking and calculating for a couple more hours. Around 11:30 I called her over and ordered Fag Detectors for everyone, extra



umbrellas, and told her to tell everyone they were from a secret admirer. Then I paid in full --\$135.00 even-- and as I was leaving the first few carafes were arriving at the tables, much to the horror of the occupants.

When I paid for my room the following morning the desk clerk asked me if I had slept well and if anything had disturbed me. He seemed to already know the answer and acted surprised when I told him I'd gotten one of the best nights of sleep of my life.

"Nothing bothered you?"

"No."

"No sirens?"

"No."

"No screaming?"

"Not that I recall."

"Gunshots, horns honking, police radios, and fire trucks?"

"Zippo. Why do you ask?"

"Around close last night there was a brawl in the bar."

"Really."

## Chapter 9

I went to the motel restaurant and ate the “continental” breakfast that consisted of three different brands of cereal and hot tea. Then I got in the car and after consulting a map discovered that I was sort of going the wrong direction. So, I got back on the road to El Paso, which, incidentally, is on Mountain Standard Time, and took Highway 85 toward Las Cruces, New Mexico.

I was correctly informed by a sign in Texas that Las Cruces was thirty-five miles from El Paso. Once in the Land of Enchantment however, information as to one's whereabouts became increasingly rare, until it was replaced by a weird form of state propagated disinformation. Though it's true I had only the vaguest of itineraries, and that my method of following it was vaguer still, I still wanted to know what towns lay ahead, and how far. Invariably, when I could just make out a sign, shimmering toward me through the heatwaves and incoherence of untravelled space, hope would spring up in me, and speeding up, I would strain to decipher the letters, always to have my hopes dashed. So on I drove, through unnamed hamlets, past forgotten roads and highways, and tried to ignore the roadsigns thoughtfully provided by the New Mexico Highway Department that informed myself and others of upcoming roadside tables and historical markers, which usually turned out to be a pile of rocks or an arroyo.

I reached the conclusion, after seven hours of sensory deprivation, that New Mexico should be fenced off from the rest of the United States. New Mexico seems to be

possessed of the philosophy that if you're not a local, you don't belong. Or maybe they just didn't buy into the Good Samaritan mode of thinking. Of course, it's possible that the absolute lack of helpful roadsigns could be a way of replenishing the supply of people who no doubt steadily move away. Maybe some folks get tired of wandering around in the wasteland like the Children of Israel and just stay in New Mexico.

I stopped around 5:00 P.M. in the little town of Magdalena, New Mexico, and after supper, I checked into a motel. I took a shower and got in bed but couldn't sleep. After a couple of hours of tossing and turning I dressed and went out to the car. I got in, turned the radio on and after fumbling around with the dial I tuned in to the only AM station I could pick up. The program, broadcasting out of the Sonoran desert, was a monologue in Spanish that I found soothing, though I couldn't understand more than the occasional word.

I have no idea how much time passed while I listened to the voice from the wilderness, but the moon was considerably lower in the sky when the show eventually went off the air, to be replaced by static. I thought about it for a moment, maybe longer, then started the Vette and pulled out onto Highway 60 and headed west for Quemado. There was really nothing else to do.

The country was vast and silent, and I imagined stars heaped like white-hot slag against the flanks of the buttes that pushed up from the red rock and sand, hard edges and angles diffused and negated by a ground fog. When the sun rose, its pale light was robbed of all power by clouds that clung to the land and the mist yielded only briefly as I passed through, only to close again seamlessly behind me.

I had been lost for hours while the fog beaded in huge droplets on the windshield and soaked my hair. The desert possessed an unreal quality, a mix of tranquility and menace like I'd never felt before, but hope to feel again.

I stopped on the side of the road, yanked out a new road atlas that I had bought to lend my madness a sense of direction and tried to figure out where I was. The map showed Quemado to be about seventy or eighty miles from Magdalena. I should have been there long ago. Of course the lack of road signs pointing the way was nothing to worry about; there were no signs pointing to anywhere.

A soft scuffling noise caused me to look up. Standing less than a foot from the passenger side door was a woman dressed in a black dress and black cape or shawl that dragged the ground. She looked impossibly old and her face, ruined by exposure to the sun and wind was framed by long gray hair that hung down to her waist. She held one claw-like hand out to me and in her open palm I saw a shiny, brand new key.

I didn't know what to say or do.

She smiled at me and nodded her head. "Found it," she said.

I nodded back. "It's real nice." I waited a moment and then asked. "Do you need some help?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, but I could use a ride." I agreed.

We drove along for a little while and though I tried, I could find nothing to say. The old woman made no effort to speak, but watched me intently, occasionally smiling and patting the dashboard. The fog was heavy as ever and I concentrated on the road.

Just when I was getting used to her, though, she told me to stop. We were still out in the badlands and though her command surprised me, I stopped anyway.

She got out of the car. And looked me over once more. "Thank you for the ride. You're not what I expected."

I had already abandoned all hope of making any sense of her so I smiled. "I hope you weren't too disappointed," I said.

"Not at all young man, you be careful. Forget Oregon," she said. "What you want isn't there."

Then, without another word she walked off into the mist and was gone. It seemed to me then as I stared after her, and it seems to me now, that New Mexico is truly a place where the gods walk undisguised.

## Chapter 10

The first clue I had that I was in Arizona was a sign that gradually solidified as I approached it through the cloud, and faded back into nothingness as it receded from me. The sign read, "Wide Ruin, Pop. 1567."

I pulled over and got out my road atlas. It was about seven in the morning, and though I was hungry, I wanted to see if I could figure out just exactly where I was. I looked around, half expecting to see the old woman again, but she didn't appear. After a few minutes spent looking in vain for Wide Ruin, New Mexico, I flipped over to the Arizona map and looked at the list of towns and there it was, Wide Ruin, Arizona.

And in the town of Wide Ruin I found Rosie's Roadside Grill. To many passers-by, Rosie's is just another gas station/tourist trap a little west of nowhere. I pulled up in front of the cafe and sat in the car, looking at it. I would imagine that most people never notice Rosie's at all, but the ones who do might describe it as "quaint" or "rustic" or maybe "cute." To me though, Rosie's Roadside Grill has another name: Casa del Hades.

And at Rosie's I saw a nice looking girl sitting at the counter, dressed in a perfectly tailored, black blazer with matching skirt, crying into her coffee while the mascara ran down her face. She was the picture of dejection. My heart went out to her, even if the two black trenches caused by her mascara did make her look a trifle deranged. But, being young and having failed both theology and metaphysics, I went and sat down a couple of stools away from her and ordered a coffee from the portly man behind the

counter. His name tag said "JOE" in capital letters, under which was inscribed in italics "*Service Technician.*"

"Where's Rose?" I asked lightly, then took a sip from the cup he brought me.

"Who?" Joe asked suspiciously.

"You know, Roseanne? Rose? Rosie? The owner?"

He stared at me.

"I'm the owner, kid," he said finally.

"Oh, You're the owner."

"What do you want with the owner, somethin' wrong with your coffee?" Joe asked, not unkindly.

"No, um, no." I looked at Joe. "No."

"Hey, kid."

"Yeah?"

"You okay?" Joe asked.

"He's okay," the girl said in a husky voice. Then she turned to me. "I'm Julie. Julie Smith. You are okay?"

I looked up at her. She had wiped the mascara off her face.

"I'm okay."

"He's tired," she said. "Where are you headed?"

"Uh, Oregon." It came out sounding like a question.

"Oregon is just lovely this time of year. At least, that's what I've heard," Julie looked down into her coffee, "I've never been out of Arizona," she finished wistfully.

"Yeah, but you've been around the world," Joe snickered.

Julie started crying again, in great, exaggerated sobs and Joe started laughing. I felt vaguely responsible, but didn't know why.

"What are you doing up here?"

"Waiting," she said, drying her eyes.

"What for?"

"Oh, opportunity."

"What opportunity?" I asked.

"The best kind of opportunity. The opportunity to do something I've never done before," she said.

"Do you need a ride?" I asked.

"No," she said.

I felt embarrassed.

"You want to stay here."

"I don't want to stay here."

"Well, what then?" I asked.

"I want to go to Oregon."

Joe started laughing again. I stared at her in horrified fascination. Julie started crying again.

"Oh," she wailed "you don't want me to go. You think I'm ugly."

She pronounced "ugly" as if someone was squeezing all of the air out of her lungs, giving it the curious effect of being a four syllable word. Joe kept laughing.



I sputtered "I don't think you're ugly, I think you're cute."

At this Joe doubled over as the bald spot on his head turned purple and he wheezed, "Kid, there's somethin' you--"

"No." I cut him off, feeling very gallant. "The lady wants to go to Oregon," I stopped, taking a breath before my leap of stupidity, "And to Oregon she shall go," I finished.

Julie and Joe both looked at me in amazement and expressed themselves accordingly. Joe fell down behind the counter, laughing and screaming that he was ready to die, he'd seen it all and Julie fixed a million dollar grin on me and said, "You're never going to forget me."

Joe got up off the floor. "Kid, listen ta me. I'm tellin' ya--"

"Thanks, but no thanks, for your no doubt excellent advice, Joe," I cut him off frostily. "Give my regards to Rosie."

And Julie and I stepped out of the cafe, me feeling very self-righteous and brave and Julie feeling, no doubt, very much like a hungry cat in a roomful of hog-tied mice.

The age of chivalry, the age of knights errant running around all over the countryside, depriving each other of life and limb while engaged in the pursuit of pointless quests for questionable women, died out for one simple, yet significant reason: It was an incredibly stupid idea.

## Chapter 11

I was still staring at Julie as she walked to the car, partly because she had gone from screaming hysterics to whistling "Dixie," literally, in maybe forty-five seconds, but mostly because the girl was every inch of 6'3."

"Wow," she said, "nice car."

"Thanks. I mowed a lot of yards to get that car."

"By the way," Julie leaned toward me, her voice a hoarse whisper, "if you ever call me 'cute' again I'll break your back."

I stared at her for a moment, realizing that not only was this girl making a promise, she was making a promise that she could keep.

"Okay," I said.

"Now back to this mo-chine," she said sweetly, getting in, '65, right? Thought so. Injected or normally aspirated?"

"What?"

"Does it have fuel injection?" she asked condescendingly.

"I didn't see, uh..."

"Injectors?"

"Injectors."

"Carbureted then. Nice paint and, oh my," long pause, "leather seats." She made "leather" sound like an obscenity. I didn't know whether to shout for joy or push her out of the car.

We drove and talked for an hour or so, but suddenly Julie stopped talking. She was looking down the blacktop toward a dirt road that led off the highway. She told me to stop but I only slowed down.

"Stop the car. I said stop! Now I wonder what is down that road?" I had a feeling that she knew exactly what was down that road.

"Nothing," I said.

"We should go look."

"We should keep going," I said.

"Oh? When exactly is it that you're expected in Oregon?" She asked innocently. I'd told her I was making a surprise visit.

"I'm not 'expected.' That still doesn't mean that I want drive down every dirt road we come across just to prove to myself that it leads to the town dump and not something wonderful."

"It doesn't lead to the dump. I want to show you something," she said. "We're going to spend a lot of time together for the next few days, and it's imperative that we be honest with each other. Right?"

"Not really."

"Yes it is," she said.

"You said you didn't know what was down this road." I protested.

"I said no such thing. Now let's go."

I sighed and turned the car down the road which wound along for a couple of miles, passed a ditch full of trash and ended abruptly in a large clearing. Some marriages in Wide Ruin may be made in Heaven, but I suspect that most were made right here.

"Give me the keys," Julie said.

I yanked the keys out of the ignition and handed them to her.

"Runs with the key out?"

"Yeah," I said.

She looked at me pointedly, then inserted the key and killed the engine. My throat suddenly felt tight and dry. Julie stepped out of the car and with a mischievous smile began to back away, slowly inching her skirt up at the same time, showing off large, muscular legs. She rolled it up until it was at the bottom hem of her panties, and then, telling me to watch closely, so I wouldn't miss anything, she did a most unusual thing. She yanked her skirt all the way up with one hand and, with the other, simultaneously pulled her underwear open and dangled the keys as if she were going to drop them inside. The fear of losing the keys, though, was fleeting. What my eyes beheld bulging against her flimsy underwear filled me with horror.

Julie Smith, goddess of love/angel from heaven had transmogrified into J. Smith, transvestite par excellence/demon from the pit.

Mom always said that if I didn't straighten up, my past would catch up with me. She never suggested the possibility of someone else's past catching up with me.

Now reason returned. All I could think of were the keys.

"I see you're thinking about the keys." He/She said laconically, pulling down her skirt.

"Yes," I said, trying to sound calm and failing.

"I'm sure we can work something out," she said. "Any suggestions?"

"No."

"Huh," She said petulantly. "A smart college boy like you can't think of any way to make me want to give back your keys?"

Besides being completely intimidated, I was starting to get pissed off.

"How 'bout I take a golf club, beat you to death, leave you here for your faggot friends to find, and we call it even?" I threatened.

J. looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, "Well, that won't work for three reasons. First, you don't have a golf club. Second, I'm considerably bigger than you. And last, though certainly not least, I don't have any 'faggot friends'. I'm not gay."

Though the first two reasons she gave were undeniable, I had a little trouble with the third.

"You? Gay? Whatever was I thinking? Somehow it'd slipped my mind that in Arizona, straight men routinely go around dressed like whores--"

"You seemed to like my outfit well enough at the cafe. Way you were looking me over, I thought you were about to proposition me on the spot."

"and hang out in coffee shops." I finished.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call it routine..." J. said thoughtfully, tapping perfectly manicured nails against the side of her leg, "but I'm certainly not dressed like a whore."

"No." I said quietly, after a moment. "My mother has that outfit."

"Well, she sounds like a lovely woman!" J. exclaimed and started the car. Then she put the keys in her purse.

To say that I felt all alone in a world turned suddenly hostile would be tantamount to saying that Napoleon probably thought Waterloo was a bad idea. I tried to keep a positive mental attitude, but the sight of a 6'3," 230 pound transvestite dressed like my mother didn't help. It seemed to only fire off those synapses usually reserved for visions of madness, confusion, paranoid delusions and so forth. You know, the usual.

"What do you want?" I finally asked.

"I've already told you."

"No. You didn't," I said slowly.

"Yes. I did." Pause. "I want a ride."

"I'm not going to Oregon," I lied.

"Well that's fine by me, I wouldn't go there if you paid me," she said.

"Where then?" I asked, feeling a little frantic.

"Graceland."

"Graceland." I repeated.

"You got it."

"Graceland?"

Paranoid delusions my ass.

## Chapter 12

I put in a Muddy Waters tape, turned the car around and started driving back towards the highway. If this wasn't a time for the blues there never would be.

"You're out of your mind," I finally said.

J. seemed to think about this for a minute, and then slowly said, "Yeah," dragging it out real slow like she was deep in thought. "That's been said. But who believes everything they hear? Besides, I want to go to Graceland, I need to go to Graceland, and I'm going to go to Graceland. There's something I have to do there. I'll go with you maybe, without you maybe, but definitely in this car. It's perfect."

We got back on the highway and headed east on Highway 68 towards Gallup, New Mexico. It was still only about eight-thirty and the morning air was crisp. The sun hadn't burned the dew off the cacti yet and the sun sparkling off the millions of points made the desert look like a new creation. I drove without saying a word. J., for her part, whistled tunelessly along with vicious abandon. I put in several different tapes, hoping to find something that she wouldn't like, but evidently her complete lack of musical ability included a complete lack of preference. She whistled the same tune, or perhaps, for the sake of accuracy, I should say non-tune, with equal enthusiasm and apparent satisfaction. We stopped in Albuquerque about noon. J. killed the car and took the keys with her. I could have run, I guess, but I didn't want to leave the car with her. I'd just have to figure some way out before too much longer. We ate a quick lunch and kept on going.

Two hours later, out in the middle of nowhere once again, the sky began to cloud over. A few drops of rain fell almost symmetrically across the windshield with staccato slaps that made me look at J. and smile wistfully. I fantasized about J., myself, and a baseball bat my father once gave me.

J. intruded with, "I think you ought to put the top up."

I drove along quietly for a while but didn't pull over. I didn't remember ever seeing the top for this car. J. turned the radio off and looked at me for a moment.

"I said I think you should pull over and put the top up."

I kept driving. I was now positive that of all the options the car had, a convertible top was in conspicuous absence.

"This car didn't come with a top," I said.

J. looked at me incredulously.

"You mean you mowed lawns for God only knows how long to buy a car and didn't get the top with it?" She finally asked.

"Ran out of yards," I said, looking straight down the road.

There was a long silence in which J., to all outward signs, appeared brain dead. As for myself, I followed my emerging philosophy of crisis control: drive, drive, drive. It might not solve the imminent problem, but it certainly did give one the sensation of progress. The rain began to fall with purpose, slamming into us like a solid wall from the front while a fine, thick mist blew back from the rear. J. evidently was trying to maintain a facade of imperturbable *hauteur*, but her hair--most of it wig actually--was plastered down on the side of her head that faced the window, while the other side was bunched up



as if for protection. I wasn't doing all that bad for the simple fact that I had finally found something that J. couldn't whistle to. A bridge loomed up out of the rain and, more from instinct than impulse, I hit the brakes and pulled to a stop underneath it.

The rain was falling so heavily now that the bridge appeared to have grey, translucent curtains on either side, into which the highway disappeared. I looked over at J., noting for the first time how heavy her beard was. It was beginning to poke through what little of her make-up was left intact. What could I possibly been thinking when I first saw her? I whistled a couple of bars from Paul Simon's "Graceland," got out of the car, and leaned against the front fender. A sense of quiet, albeit humid, peace descended, and a feeling of timelessness stole over me. All of this ascended rather quickly though, as an eighteen-wheeler hauling a trailer load of wet and, understandably, irate, chickens hurtled through the waterfall curtain and on through the other side, missing me by inches. A fine, barnyard-smelling mist, punctuated by chicken feathers, was all that was left to mark its passing. This was too much. I yanked out my road atlas and tried to figure out where we were. I calculated, with very little accuracy, that the next town lay about ten to fifteen miles out in the violent humidity. I expressed this miscalculation to J. and got back into the car.

I started the car, drove from the fleeting sanctuary of the interstate grotto, and for the next seventy miles we hop-scotched between twelve bridges, three deserted gas stations, and one church, complete with steeple and, more importantly, an awning. Finally, cold, wet and facing impending dismemberment by a 230- pound transvestite, I saw hope and swerved off of an exit ramp at seventy miles per hour (according to my

best calculations) into, across, and out the other side of the parking lot of what was named--I promise--the "Ya'll Slide Inn Bar And Dance Hall," and came to a stop in about a foot of mud. I looked over at J., who had done her best to stuff her less than petite frame into the footwell and said, "Honey, we're home."

## Chapter 13

Conversation stopped, heads turned and mouths fell agape when we straggled into the bar. At last call we'd have been bad enough but at 8:00 P.M. We were a sight to make women run and grown men cry. Some did. Though we both were dripping wet, J. in particular looked like a creature from the deep, what with the disarray of her synthetic locks and water streaming down her huge frame. She clutched her purse like a talisman and went straight to the ladies room, taking the car keys with her. Lacking both a razor to slash my wrists with and a need to make water, I sat down at a table.

Everyone was still looking at me, and when the waitress finally got up enough courage to come to the table, they looked at her too.

Before she could say anything I asked where we were.

"Well, you're at the Y'all--"

"I don't mean that. I mean what town."

"Oh. You're 'tween Carrizozo and Vaughn."

"Where's that in relation to Albuquerque?"

"Albuquerque?"

"Uh-huh."

"New Mexico?"

"That very one."

"It's about a hundred miles north and west a' here."

I didn't know where we were supposed to be but I did know it wasn't south of Albuquerque. Lost again.

"Where you tryin' ta get to, hon?"

"Well, we're headed for Tennessee," I said.

The waitress looked at me with pity. "Ain't no Tennesse 'round here. You must be lost."

I looked up at her. "Have you ever seen an old woman wandering around out in the middle of the desert?"

She shook her head. "Honey, do you want to get somethin' to eat or, uh, drink?" She asked in that tone of voice people use when they're talking to someone's pit bull and wondering if it's been fed.

"Got any Sterno?" I asked.

She didn't say anything at first, just looked at me and kept darting her eyes towards the bar as if she were judging the distance.

"No, baby doll, I don't think we do." She seemed to be choosing her words very carefully.

I didn't know what her problem was, but she was starting to make me jumpy, so I said, "Beer then. Bring me a *Dos Equis*."

"Uh, honey, we don't have that kind of beer. I'm real sorry, but, we, uh, just, you know..." Her voice trailed off with a thin, high pitched sound .

"Yeah, I know. Don't worry about bringing me anything you don't have. That just complicates the issue, right? Yeah, right. This is definitely one issue that doesn't need

complicating. Bring me something you do have, okay?" I was starting to babble. I don't know why it is, but whenever I'm around someone who's nervous, I start getting nervous too. Probably genetic. She reeled off to fill my order, and I heard a murmur pass over the crowd, which was made up of about thirty-five cowboy and cowgirl types. They had all turned to look at J. emerging from the bathroom and looking, I must admit, like a million bucks. Freshly made up, her confidence restored, showing just a touch of dampness around the edges, she was a sight. Most of the women looked at her with murder in their eyes, and the men, well, they looked to have different intentions. She came up and sat down with a flourish and said, "Where's my drink?"

"Still at the bar," I snapped at her.

"Look, you're just going to have to deal with the fact that we're going to be spending a lot of time together between now and Tennessee. Now the way I see it, that time can be as painless as possible or it can be real bad. Or you could just give me the car. Ever since I was a young, well, ever since I was young, I've wanted a car like that." J. was feeling very chatty. I wasn't.

"Don't they have yards where you're from? Go buy your own."

"Don't need to."

The waitress came back, balancing the Lone Star a little shakily on a tray, set it down and dashed off.

About that time a very large, very drunk cowboy approached our table to the accompaniment of varied catcalls and the other substitutes that pass for the spoken word.

"Ma'am, I couldn't help but notice," he started, looking at me, "well, noticin' that you're out with College Boy here, I thought maybe I could convince you to take a turn or two out on the daince floor. I mean, of course, if you don't mind, sir," he finished sarcastically, looking at me.

"I would love to," J. started, "but as you noticed, I am with someone."

Cowboy Numero Uno looked at me and started laughing. Finally he said: "Oh hell, honey, he don't care."

"How are you so..." she started, but I interrupted,

"He's right, I don't care. Dance to your little heart's content."

J. frowned a little, but stood up and The Cowboy took a step back as the rest of the audience gasped. Evidently, they hadn't seen her in all her bulk. Or maybe they had and some innate desire for proportion had overridden their collective senses. I don't know.

"My, your a sturdy lil' ol' thing, aren't you?" The Cowboy, whose name, it turned out, was Red, blurted out. There was nothing little or not sturdy about her, I thought to myself. This bitch was built to last. I sat back in my chair while J. and The Cowboy careened around the space between the tables and in front of the jukebox, in a sort of half-drunken, half-controlled pirouette. Half-drunken and half controlled because he was drunk and she was definitely in control. No sooner had they finished reeling around the room a couple more times than two more of the cowboy variety were tapping Red on the shoulder and asking to cut in. Red brushed a tangle of black hair out of his eyes and said, "sure, I guess," and stumbled back to his table.

As the waiting list to have J.'s interpretation of the Two- Step inflicted on them

grew, I became increasingly aware of the fact that the entire crowd was looking in my direction and laughing, no doubt, at the paroxysms of humiliation they thought they saw on my face. It is true that I was in anguish, but the exact cause of it had nothing to do with the fact that my dinner/traveling companion had danced with every man in the house at least twice. It had to with the voice I kept hearing. Strangely enough, was my mother's. She kept saying, "Any minute now, one of those guys is going to realize that they're dancing with a man. And it's your fault."

Somehow I felt that trying to explain that J. wasn't a man by choice would be received with very little tolerance. A movement at the bar caught my attention. It was a girl, maybe twenty, with long, blond hair and a slim build that made me think... I stopped suddenly. The thought of picking up two transvestites with a yen for travel and the infliction of psychic abuse, however slight the odds, made me dizzy. I looked back at where J. was struggling around the dance area, locked up with some stupid redneck who was about 5'3." I grimaced. Seeing her towering over him and trying to look feminine and relaxed at the same time about made my hair stand on end. I wanted to run but the car was still stuck in the mud outside, and J. still had the keys.

"Excuse me." A girlish voice. I looked up to see the blond girl from the bar. I tried not to whimper. I failed.

"Can I sit down?" she asked. I stared at her for a minute in what must have appeared a most lascivious way. Everything seemed to have been attached at birth.

"Can I sit down?" She was starting to turn a little red, and I took for this a good

sign.

"Go ahead."

"Thanks. I'm Joette. Are you always this rude, or is it cause of her?" She motioned towards my dancing transvestite and her rotating morons.

"It's not her. I was thinking of something else. I couldn't care less about her."

"Oh yeah, right. Why, if I was to go out with some great- lookin' guy and he left me stranded at the table while he danced with every girl in the place, I wouldn't mind neither."

"Well, you might or you might not, depending on the particular circumstances," I observed from my superior vantage point.

"Oh, well, I guess you love 'em and leave 'em types are a little different than most," she laughed, sitting back in her chair and throwing an arm over the backrest, "but I guess most folks wouldn't take too kindly to it."

"You're probably right. What are you doing up here by yourself? You do this a lot?" I asked.

"I'm not 'up here by myself', I ain't no bar-whore. I came up here with my boyfriend, Buck."

Great, I thought, just what I need to round out my evening; a nice thrashing from Buck. "And just where exactly is this Buck, right now?" I asked. "Exactly?"

Joette looked at me for a moment and then fell apart. Between sobs she gasped, "Heee's owut there daincin'." I whirled around in my chair. The only couple up dancing were J. and a rather large fellow whom I strongly suspected would answer with an



affirmative "Yo," were one to call out "Buck?"

My distress factor was at what I thought was the highest it could get. I was wrong. While I watched J. and Buck, I noticed that she seemed to be paying an inordinate amount of attention to his backside. In fact, she was rubbing her hands across it. I couldn't be sure, because they turned and snaked their way down the far wall and all I could see was Buck, eyes half-closed with a look of contentment on his face. He did open them once, and gave the bar a rather cursory glance, as if he was looking for something but couldn't quite remember what. On their next pass I was ready, but with darkness providing cover and Joette's alternate cursing and sniffing distracting me, I couldn't quite tell what was going on. It looked like J. was sort of rooting around behind Buck's back, when finally and with horror, I realized what she was up to.

She was picking his pocket.

About the time that she got his wallet safely out of his hip pocket, they turned sort of broadside and Buck stiffened as he recognized Joette at my table. J., evidently recognizing the situation for what it was, grabbed Buck by the hand and firmly led him over, seating him opposite me.

"My. Well, that was some dance. How long have I been up?"

she asked me innocently, fanning her face with her hand.

I looked at my watch. "About forty-five minutes, by my timepiece."

Joette looked up and across at Buck, who seemed to be trying to figure out whether he was supposed to be mad at her for sitting with me, or if he had forfeited that right by dancing with J. Joette's mascara was drifting a bit, the sight of which troubled

me deeply, for reasons that were completely self- preservative. Joette then looked at J. with a mixture of awe and hatred. For her part, J. seemed perfectly at ease. No one at the table was her match in physical prowess, the girl's make-up was a mess, Buck was still weighing his options (or at least trying to figure out what they were) and I didn't have the keys. We were hers to toy with. The waitress came and J. ordered a round of drinks.

"I'll have a seven and seven, Buck here will have a draft beer," she nodded at me. "He'll have another Lone Star, and give Polly Pureheart there a Shirley Temple." The waitress looked stunned.

"Oh, I forgot, we're out here in East Egypt. Give her some ginger ale. You do know what ginger ale is, don't yuh, honeee pie?" J. finished.

The waitress nodded "yes," unconvincingly, and withdrew.

"Where were we? Oh yes. Buck meet Colin. Colin, Buck."

"Hi, Buck, how's the libido?" I asked.

Buck snorted something that wasn't completely hostile and turned his attention to Joette, who was still staring at J. with an intensity that would have made a catatonic blush. J. was unfazed and looked right back, smiling sweetly. I had a brief mental flash of the young J. in elementary school, wilting his teachers with that same look while he/she critiqued their outfits.

Buck finally broke the silence.

"Julie tells me y'all are on yer way to Graceland to see that Elvis Presley shrine."

"Is that so?" I asked.

"M'self, I always thought he was kinda funny, if you know what I mean."

I indicated that I did in fact know exactly what he meant. J. kind of sucked her breath in, through clenched teeth, and I felt that a bloodletting was imminent, but about that time the drinks arrived. The waitress had indeed brought Joette a ginger ale, and this was, apparently, the end of the line. I feel obligated to say that while Joette had, up to this time, suffered in silence, when she did react, it was with remarkable efficiency. She held up her ginger ale in one hand and hissed, "I have been coming in here for three years now, Betty, and in that time I have never, ever, drank anythin' but Pearl beer, and YOU KNOW THAT," she finished in a shriek, at the same time throwing the contents of her glass on Buck and the glass itself at J., who ducked demurely. I would think that ordinarily, a scene of this sort, in a public place, would have fairly far reaching impact, if for no other reason than the occasion it provides for everyone else to turn, stare and snicker. In this particular case, however, that is what everyone had been doing since we arrived and so the repercussions were pretty much confined to our table. Buck was, understandably, livid and controlled himself with some difficulty. He resorted to the typical reaction of an ignoramus who knows he deserves everything that is happening to him. He tried to shift the blame.

"Woman, I'm about fed up with your jealous ways. I didn't say nothin' about you sittin' over here, but you pull another stunt like that and I'm liable to take up with Julie here. You wouldn't want me to have to make that college boy there that you been carryin' on over all night cry, now would you?"

Joette got quiet as if she were reviewing her options.

"Take her," I said.

Buck looked at me with shock and surprise. The soon-to-be-jilted lover never says that in the movies. Joette's interpretation was altogether different, and looking at me for support, she took a deep breath and said, "Yeah, Buck, you do that. You need a woman around who looks like she ain't never done a honest day's work in her life. What's your idea of hard work Julie, having to walk all the way across the mall parking lot?" You could cut the tension with a knife.

Buck and Joette looked at J. to see what she could contribute to the present dilemma, and I knew for a fact that she could contribute a lot. I figured the odds that I'd leave in a rubber bag were pretty good.

"Well really, Buck that is awfully sweet of you," J. drawled, batting her eyes at Buck.

He sat up straighter in his chair and flashed a malicious grin at Joette and me.

"But really, you're not my type." Buck sagged and Joette swooped in for the kill.

"Yeah, I think I actually agree with you about that, Julie," she said, "when you get the two of 'em together, 'ol Buck there sorta comes up short, don't he?" She said lightly, but her eyes were flat and cold.

Every man, when faced with a crisis of this nature, will react in some, usually uncalled for way. Buck looked at me with less than the best of intentions and tried to jump up, but didn't get to fully express himself, because J. caught him by one arm and held him down into his seat. Joette started giggling and asked Buck if he needed any help, then leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

A crowd was beginning to gather around the table and when Buck couldn't get

loose from J., something seemed to just give way and he went wild and hit her in the mouth. A chorus of boo's and hisses greeted this, but J. calmly spat some blood on the table, grabbed him by the hair on the back of his head and slammed his face into the table, twice, breaking his nose and spraying blood on the plastic table cloth. She let go of him and he slid to the floor.

Joette quit laughing. She looked at J. as if she might jump on her, but thinking better of it, got a couple of Buck's friends to help her drag him over into the corner, where she began to clean him up. The crowd was silent, and a few that I took to be particularly sympathetic to Buck or Joette, adopted a more serious attitude and sat down, still looking at us.

"What did you have to do that for?" I was apalled.

"Because the lowest form a man can take is one who hits women. I won't stand for it."

"You're not a woman," I pointed out.

"He thinks I am. Besides. What do you care, he was about to tear you apart," J. said.

"Only because you wouldn't leave well enough alone. I saw you."

"Saw what?"

"I saw you steal his wallet."

"I don't have his wallet."

"I saw you take it, which means probably someone else in here saw it too."

"I put it back. Besides, if anyone saw me take it, or anyone else's for that matter,

they'd have called 'thief' or whatever these hicks scream when faced with that circumstance," she said calmly.

"Why'd you take it if you were going to put it back?" I asked.

"I didn't say that I put it back in the same condition I found it. We need some traveling money."

"Anyone else's?! That doesn't, I hope, mean that you took more than one wallet?"

"Took and replaced. Took and replaced. There's a big difference," she said.

"Huge."

"Either way, when last call comes and everybody that danced with you figures out he doesn't have a dime to his name, we're dead."

"That's what makes this a good time to leave."

"Sure," I said, "no problem. It's raining enough to make Noah say 'Shouldn't we be building a bigger boat, Lord?', my car is stuck up to the doors in mud, and you say, 'I know, let's leave'." I looked away. "We're dead."

J. got up and asked if anyone had a truck that could pull her car out of the mud. About forty-seven hands shot up in the air.

"Good," she said, "it's the red Corvette outside. Come back and tell me when you're done." About ninety-four pairs of legs ran out into the torrent. We had a couple more drinks. Around fifteen minutes later, a red faced guy in his thirties came back in and said: "It's out of the mud, ma'am. If he's the one that was drivin' maybe you oughta do it

fer now on. If I had a car like that I sure wouldn't let jes' any idiot off the street tear it all

up, no sir," He finished, glaring at me with resentment and envy.

"Why thank you so much, leave me your name and number so I can reward your kindness. I'll certainly think about your advice also," she finished, winking at me, and making a face.

"We need to get out of here," I said under my breath.

"Can someone please recommend a good motel?" she asked.

The waitress blurted out, "There's one just up the road. You can't miss it."

If I ever get back to the Ya'll Slide Inn again, I'm going to strangle that waitress.

## Chapter 14

We stepped out into the parking lot. J. told me to drive. She jumped into the passenger's side, put the key in the ignition, started the car, then pulled the key out and stuck it in her purse. I shouldn't have shown her that trick.

The motel the waitress suggested wasn't exactly "just up the road," but was more like around twenty miles away and turned out to be a sort of home for wayward girls/den of iniquity. It was the only thing we passed, but in light of J.'s pocket-picking back at the bar I thought we should keep on going. But she insisted on stopping.

The waitress was right though, anybody that drove past this place did so on purpose. Built to resemble the Alamo in every detail, it catered to the homeless, the shiftless and, in our case, the witless. J., of course, thought it was quaint.

I pulled into the parking lot, and J. inserted the key and killed the motor. Two or three girls in mini-skirts and spike heels lounged around in front of the building. They eyed J. with hostility.

We got out of the car and took in the scenery, in particular, the building itself.

"We're not staying here," I said.

"But I want to!" she exclaimed.

"Fine. I'm not staying here."

"Hope you brought your walking shoes," she said, dangling the keys in front of me.



"Look. We can't stay here with any reasonable expectation of leaving in the same state of good repair we're in now."

"But I've never been to the Alamo."

"You can stay here till the Mexicans stage a second coming and still have not been to the Alamo. This is a whorehouse."

"So? It looks like the Alamo."

"Oh yeah, I forgot, for you looking like is as good as being like," I said.

Ignoring me, J. said, "They'll rent us a room. Besides, technically it is not a whorehouse. It may be a type of house and prostitutes may frequent it, but at heart and by definition, it is a motel."

Semantics.

"I not worried about them not renting us a room, I'm worried about them giving us a disease."

The rain had been decreasing, but about that time it started coming down harder again and J. looked at me and raised an eyebrow. I gave up, as had become my wont.

We walked into the lobby, and glanced around, trying to look nonchalant. J. was openly impressed. The builder had not abandoned the Alamo motif on the inside either. Scorched and ragged Texas flags hung from fake roof timbers spanning the length of the ceiling. The walls had been made to look like adobe but they were painted a weird color of cobalt blue, with fake bullet holes. Even the windows had those little stickers on them that made them look as if they had been shot a few hundred times. Most confusing.

The manager came out from behind some curtains that had "Remember The Alamo" and "Remember San Jacinto" stenciled on them, walked around behind the counter and stood in front of a life-sized velvet painting of John Wayne. He sized J. up in awe.

"Whaddayawant?" One word.

"We would like a room, please," J. said sweetly.

"Howlong?"

"Excuse me?"

"How many hours, lady? One, two?" Then looking at me he said, "If I were you I'd just take him out back. We don't never rent rooms for no ten minutes." He laughed a little and looked at me.

I looked over his shoulder to where John Wayne hung on the wall, staring across the lobby, lost in silence.

"If you were me you wouldn't be stuck out here," she said.

When he didn't say anything, J. went back to her original line of questioning.

"How much for all night?" J. asked.

"Well, like I awreadytol'you, we rent by the hour. Cost ya ten dollars a hour, so however much that comes to, youfiggeritup," he growled.

I noticed that whoever had done the painting had forgotten to paint the pupils in Mr. Wayne's eyes, giving him a strange, soulless look. I couldn't pull myself away from him, and I listened only vaguely to J. and the manager squabbling about the price of the room. I felt like I was at a place where what things seem to be and what they really are

intersect. The fact that I had felt like that for most of the trip didn't blunt the sensation. I felt like I was standing with my back to an abyss that John Wayne looked out into.

"Well, it's midnight now, so assuming that we get out of here by eight a.m., that comes to eighty dollars, which is outrageous," J. said.

"So stay till six and it'll costless," he retorted.

I snapped out of my reverie and noticed that J. was getting a bit flustered, which did me a world of good. I liked seeing her upset. She tried to bargain with the manager, but he wouldn't come off his price, partly because he didn't want to and partly, I suspect, because he didn't know how to. I told J. later that she should have told him that eight times ten was twenty-seven-fifty or something. She wouldn't have listened anyway. At any rate she finally gave in and J. paid the eighty dollars in advance, because he wouldn't give us the key otherwise. On the way out J. asked him for a wake up call.

"A wake up what?" He asked.

"Wake up call. I can't afford to oversleep here," J. snapped petulantly.

"We don't give no wake up calls here lady."

"Never?"

"Ever." He looked at us for a second. "Lady, no one comes here to sleep."

I looked over my shoulder at John Wayne as we walked out into the parking lot. I decided that my life really wasn't turning out like I'd planned.

## Chapter 15

From the look of the room, the decorator had been a man in touch with the whims of chaos. Magenta-colored walls struck a brutal contrast with a lime green shag carpet that lay on the floor like a punk rock hairpiece. A battered dressing table sat crookedly against the wall to the right of the door and had a black and white television set from about 1966, chained to the top of it; this thing belonged in the Smithsonian.

Directly across from the electric artifact crouched a heart-shaped bed with tiger stripe sheets and a red velvet comforter. A coin-operated device was plugged into the right side of the bed near the headboard and looked like it had braved some heavy weather. A sign above it read "BILL CHANGER IN PARKING LOT."

J. looked around the room with obvious disgust and threw her purse on the bed.

"What a pig sty!"

I didn't say anything. I was transfixed by a huge mirror on the ceiling above the bed. It was so badly smudged and discolored that I couldn't really see myself clearly. I sort of looked like John Wayne.

"I can't believe I paid eighty dollars for this, this ..." Words failed her, temporarily. "It's so tasteless, it even has a heart-shaped bed. Can you believe, a heart-shaped bed in a motel that looks like the Alamo and is obviously just a whorehouse? Sacrilege!"

"I guess the interior decorator didn't know what shape lust is," I said distractedly, still looking into the depths of the mirror.

J. looked at me for a minute and then said, "Bud, you have a lot to learn. Lust comes in all shapes and sizes."

I didn't have anything to say to that. Something about being tutored by a transvestite in an Alamo shaped whorehouse on the back side of nowhere seems to just shut me down.

I locked myself in the bathroom and slept sitting up in the shower, where I had a dream.

I was in a large room with very little furniture and no windows. There weren't any lights, but everything was illuminated with a strange blue glow, sort of like black light, but closer perhaps to neon.

Then I saw that the room was split-level, with a rectangular area in the center that was two or three feet lower than the rest, with steps on all sides that led down. There was a couch at one end. I walked to it and sat down to wait.

I began hearing a dripping noise and looking around saw that water was beginning to trickle down the wall opposite me. Pretty soon water started coming down the other walls and under the door and the lower level began to fill up, so I pulled my feet up onto the couch.

Looking across at the adjacent wall, I noticed for the first time a large painting of this guy walking out of a room. The frame had a little plaque that said "Departures" on it. I could tell he was going into the darkness because he was looking back over his shoulder

into the room. The profile of his face and one arm stood out in relief against the blackness of wherever he was going, illuminated by the light from the open door.

In the room there was another man lying on a table and just beyond him an older man and woman were sitting with their heads bowed and hands folded in their laps. Between them sat a large figure in a clown suit with red and yellow polka dots and fake orange hair, with a plastic bald spot, which seemed kind of funny. Unlike the other two, his face was top lit, casting his eyes in deep shadow, and illuminating his forehead and cheekbones. He was staring straight out the door, smiling sardonically at the other man. His look of malevolent speculation was so pure it scared me.

I looked closer at the body on the table, and realized with shock that he was the same man in the foreground.

Water was running down the wall and directly over the front of the painting now and was beginning to make the colors streak and run off the canvas, except for the demonic presence in the clown suit who watched me from the wall.

The water was almost to the top of the couch seat now and I started thinking that I should leave or try to call someone to help me, but I couldn't think of anyone to call.

I started hearing a loud pounding noise coming from the wall the painting was on and then I woke up with a start.

I was disoriented at first, but the events of the last few hours began to come back to me. The knocking continued. J. was flailing away at the door for all she was worth. I was sitting in three inches of water.

"Colin! Open up! We've got to get out of here!" She yelled through the door.

I hesitated briefly and then went and opened the door and was a little surprised to see J. standing there in a tee shirt and boxer shorts, sans make-up and looking for all the world like a reasonably well-adjusted and well-developed white male.

"What have you done with Julie?" I asked.

"Very few transvestites sleep in drag."

"That's comforting."

She looked pensive.

"Shut up. We have to leave. The manager from the front desk just called and said that some guys are in the lobby and they seem really anxious to see us."

## Chapter 16

It took a moment for the full impact of this little bombshell to sink in, but when it did I became a man of words.

"They are going to come in here, take back their money, kill us, and bury us in a shallow grave."

I sat down on the bed and as I put my head in my hands, inspiration fell on me like a benediction.

"You don't have any men's clothes, do you?" I asked, looking at her, but I knew the answer.

"No. What do have in mind?" J. wasn't scared, but didn't seem too interested in trying to fight her way out of the motel.

"You're going to give me the car keys and run out there into that lobby screaming that a moose-sized prostitute and her pimp stole you blind. While you're ranting and raving, I'll climb out the window, get the car, pull around front and when you see me, run and jump in."

J. looked at me and said, "If I give you the keys, you'll leave me."

"No I won't, Scouts Honor," I lied. "Look, you don't have a choice. You're too big to go out that window, and we both can't slip past them in the lobby. If you try to walk out casually, they're going to think it a bit odd that you don't have any clothes on. If you



get dressed and go out there without make-up on they'll shoot you on sight. Your dance card has been punched."

Tough logic to argue against. I was banking on her causing a big enough diversion for me get to the car. Then I was going to feed her to the wolves.

J. thought about it for a minute and then tossed me the keys.

"If you try to get away without me, I will hunt you down, find you, and kill you."

"Trust me." I smiled. J. grabbed my suitcase and ran out the door screaming murder and mayhem.

I crawled out the window and ran around the edge of the building, but stopped short and jumped back into the shadows. A large bubba holding a baseball bat was sitting on the hood of my car. Story of my life.

I'm firmly convinced that if the truth were known, most of the great and heroic things that have been done in the history of the world, desperation is probably the single most common motivating factor.

I took a couple of deep breaths and ran out from my hiding place, yelling at the top of my lungs. I'd like to say that I was screaming a war cry calculated to strike fear and confusion into the hearts of brave men, but, as often happens when under duress, one's mind seems to be totally disconnected from one's body.

I guess that's why, as I rounded the corner and closed in on the large farmer type holding my car hostage, I was howling, "THE QUEEN IS DEAD!"

I never slowed down and I never shut up. He slid off the hood of the car with the grace and elegance of a three-legged cow on a steep hill, while I closed the gap between

us, chanting my unique little ditty from the backside of my subconscious and waving my arms around my head.

As I got up to him I could tell that my stride was going to have to be modified a bit to fulfill my purpose, so I hopped straight into the air, skipped once (which confused him no end) and hit him as hard as I could right between the eyes.

He fell to the ground with a groan and I jumped into the car and fired it up, dumped the clutch and headed around toward the front gate.

As I rounded the side of the building I saw J. staggering out with three or four guys beating on her, and probably the same synapses that fired off my "The queen is dead" thing hijacked my body again.

In any event, whatever it was prompted me to swing the car around and drive straight at the struggling mob. Cutting close to them, I tried to single J. out to run over her, but instead grazed two of them, knocking them down. I stopped the car and watched.

The odds were more or less evened for J. and she threw one of the men still holding onto her down, then kicked him in the stomach. The remaining combatant tried to get loose, but J. grabbed him and started slamming his head against the front of the car.

I was honking the horn and screaming at her to stop, but she wouldn't. I jumped out tried drag her off, but she spun around and hit me in the chest.

I was lying on the ground, still yelling at her when she suddenly stopped, grabbed me and pitched me into the car. Then I saw a blur out of the corner of my eye and something hit me in the side of the head.

I don't remember anything after that.

## Chapter 17

Wind in my hair and she was stretched out on the beach, only I didn't know what beach or who she was. This weird music was playing and then I came to and I was in the passenger seat and J. was driving along in a sun dress that was about as old as the car, cat eye sunglasses and was smoking a cigarette. She had a scarf tied over her hair to keep it from blowing away. The only thing remaining from my dream was the music and it definitely was stranger than fiction. Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass were driving straight into my brain while J. kept the beat by rapping her knuckles, some of which were conspicuously devoid of skin, on the dash board.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky and J. was all smiles too. "What happened last night?" I asked her.

"Oh, I guess we upset some people. Your plan didn't work too well."

"I'm going to Graceland with an alien," I said.

"Oh, you. How do you feel?"

"Okay, I guess. What time is it?"

"Bout 9:30. How's the noggin?"

"What?"

"Your noggin, your head? How is it?" J. repeated.

"Hurts. What happened to me?"

"Didn't see a thing. I put you in the car, hopped in and drove like a girl possessed. When I noticed you, I thought you'd gone to sleep. Until I saw the blood, that is."

"Blood. I am bleeding. Great."

"Well, you're not bleeding now. I looked you over. You'll live."

Herb was really starting to get to me.

"What is that crap you're listening to?" I yelled at J.

"Crap?" J. asked innocently, tapping herself on the forehead as if in thought.

"Crap? Hmmm. I'm really not at all sure what you are talking about."

"On the radio."

"There is no crap on our radio," J. returned.

"There's no 'our' in radio either."

"Well that's fairly obvious, I think."

"The music then."

"Oh, you mean my new Herb Alpert tape. Isn't he divine?"

"Had something a little less complimentary in mind," I said, and then I looked down and saw the cassette case and the price of Herb's latest crime against man.

"\$13.99, you paid \$13.99 for..."

J. silenced me with a look.

"How silly of me. Of course you didn't pay \$13.99 for Herb and the boys. Where'd you pick it up?"

"We filled up at a little Diamond Shamrock a ways back. I used your gas card, hope you don't mind..." J. started.

"And Herb came with us," I finished for her. "So now I guess we can add the Triple A Auto Club to the ever growing list of people who have orders to shoot us on sight."

"Thanks for picking me up last night," J. said.

"A mistake I won't make twice."

"Oh don't be silly. It was very nice. You did the right thing."

"Right? What's that? Don't answer, don't say anything. Just leave me alone."

We drove along in silence for the better part of an hour until we saw a diner. The main part of the building was an old trolley car that was painted orange, black and yellow. Fused to what would have been the back of the trolley was a new looking cinder block structure that no one had bothered to paint. I told J. to stop and she pulled up in front of the door. Two dogs trotted by and I watched them until they disappeared behind an old truck parked at the edge of the parking lot.

The cinder block store had a huge sign on top of it that read: "MIKE'S BIKE EXTRAVAGANZA" in huge block letters, with "Bicycles For The Masses" in smaller letters directly underneath them.

We walked in and sat down at a booth and waited. About five minutes passed in which nothing was said, and then a short, stocky guy walked out of the back and up to our table. He was holding a bicycle rim in one hand and balancing two glasses of water in the other, which he placed in front of us.

J. and I took one look at him and I said "You must be Mike."

"Yep, that'd be me!"

"Are you still serving breakfast?" J. asked.

"That's all we serve, morning, noon and night."

Entirely too cheerful.

We didn't answer.

"What would you folks be needin' on this fine morning. No! Let me guess! Let me guess! Two of my famous "Peddler's Breakfast Combos" and a new, bright, shiny, twelve-speed touring bicycle apiece!" He looked J. over once more, and then said "Maybe we oughta make it three combos!"

J. got up from the table and stalked off to the ladies' room. Mike watched her go and then turned to me and said "I surely do hope I've got a bike that is, uh, that can... what I mean to say is that will accommodate a lady of her stature," he finished, beaming in satisfaction for having not put his foot entirely in his mouth.

"Well, I surely do hope so too," I said. "In case a lady of her stature does come in here with the intention of buying a bike, instead of say, breakfast."

Mike took my hint.

"I'll get those combos on the stove."

As he turned to go I stopped him. "What town are we in?"

He looked thoughtful but I doubt he was. "Acomita," he said. Mike went to the kitchen to fix breakfast.

J. returned from the bathroom and I noticed for the first time that the left side of her face was swollen a little and that she was wearing extra make-up, which I hadn't thought possible, to compensate.

"The way I see it, we're only about five hundred miles from Memphis and," she paused for effect "Graceland." She breathed Graceland out like a blessing and looked at me solemnly for support or something, I don't know.

"Do you have a job? Who are you?" I yelled at her.

"Yes, I have a job. I work for the Arizona Department of Wildlife."

"Yes? And?" As per the norm, I was lost.

"I'm a game warden."

"Game warden."

The vision of four or five men being stopped by J. in the woods and asked to show their identification and hunting licenses got the drop on me. Four or five men, no doubt having saved their money and vacation time for the opportunity to get out in the woods, forget showers, nix shaving and, and, here comes J., popping out from behind a tree, dressed in the height of game law enforcement fashion no doubt, to inquire. Four or five unsuspecting...

"Hello? Colin? Anybody home? I see that the lights..."

"What?" I snapped.

"Breakfast. My, aren't we touchy." She said. Mike was eyeing us from the counter, and looking at what appeared to be a catalogue.

"Why are you here? Shouldn't you be out making sure that the rights of ducks or rabbits or something aren't being infringed upon?"

"Oh, I'm on vacation. That's why I was in such a state when we met. The first couple of my vacation days are always like that, and then I get better, you know, stop hanging out at the cafe and such," she said nicely.

"So you've done this sort of thing before?"

"What sort of thing?"

"You know what I mean. This," I said, sweeping my hand around.

"I'm not sure I--"

"This," I yelled. "Kidnapping! Extortion! Rape!"

"Don't be silly. No one's been raped." She narrowed her eyes. "No one's going to either."

"But you have done this sort of thing before. Used your feminine, well, your wiles, to lure some unsuspecting kid from safety, hijacked his Corvette, whatever--then forced him to drive you to Graceland."

"Kidnapped? You practically begged me to go with you. God knows what you had in mind."

I slapped the table with the flat of my hand. J. jumped a little. Her eyebrows rose in surprise.

"But you have," I yelled. "You have done this sort of thing before?"

"No. I've never done this sort of thing before," J. said.

"But?"



"But I've often thought I should."

Up at the counter Mike shook his head, muttered something to himself, flipped through some more pages and absently swatted at a fly.

I glanced out the window and watched the heat waves rise off the asphalt, wondered if there is life after death and if so, could my great-grandmother see me.

Mike's breakfast combos were not all that bad. I really hadn't had an opportunity to watch J. eat yet and was surprised to note that her table manners were pretty good, as she kept most of the food that she didn't eat at least near her plate.

My head was pounding from whatever had hit me the night before and every time I looked out into the parking lot, the exertion of squinting against the sunlight made it worse.

There wasn't a trace of the previous night's flood. Off in the distance three or four vultures circled high up, wings spread against the blue sky that looked like eternity, lazily riding the thermals and watching, I imagined, me.

## CHAPTER 18

I guess the rigors of the previous night were beginning to take their toll on J., because around four in the afternoon she began nodding off to sleep.

We hadn't spoken much since that morning, though she made a couple of half-hearted attempts every now and then to explain where we were, what roads we had taken or would take and how long it'd take to get there. As for me, I was in no mood for anything except getting away from my shadow.

The fact that this whole fiasco was the product of a botched attempt at real-time virtual reality on my part really brought me down.

One lesson I'd really homed in on was that you can try to run from circumstance, but it always comes looking for you. J. finally gave up and pulled over onto the shoulder. She looked at me for a long second.

"I'm tired, but it's too early to stop. I'm going to let you drive for awhile. Stay on 66 and wake me when we get to Shamrock, Texas."

"Aw, hey that's great! You're going to let me drive my own car? Wow, thanks!" There might have been a touch of sarcasm in my voice, but no more than a touch.

J. didn't respond, but let me know with a look that she didn't find humor where I did. I was thinking that maybe when she got out of the car I'd have a second to shove it into gear and leave her, but she nuked that plan by sliding toward me and making me crawl over her, like you do when you're driving and don't want to stop.

While we were struggling to achieve a maneuver that the engineers at General Motors hadn't taken into their calculations, several trucks and/or passenger vehicles slowed down to stare and honk and in general make me feel most uncomfortable. The switch was finally completed and we sat in our respective seats trying to catch our breaths.

"How do I get to Shamrock?" I panted.

I noticed movement in the rearview mirror and jumped, illogically thinking maybe the men from the Alamo had found us. Instead it was the old woman who had given me directions out in the desert.

"You stay on the same road you started on," she said as she walked up to J.'s side of the car. "There are no turns between here and your destination."

"Hi!" J. said. "You need a ride?"

I wondered briefly just where J. expected her to sit, but she shook her head and walked back the way she had come from.

"You know her?" I asked. My eyes were opened as wide as my mouth.

"Oh sure," J said. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Well I don't know her," I said. "I mean not well. Not even her name. But I do know her. Sort of."

J. gave me a strange look.

"I've never seen that old woman before in my life, and neither have you. Now shut-up and drive."

I didn't see any point in arguing, nor did I want to.

"Stay on this road, got it? She was right about that. There are no turns between here and Memphis. Wake me up at nine or ten and I'll be ready to relieve you," J. said, pulling the key out of the ignition switch.

And with that unfortunate choice of words she went to sleep. Relieve me. The old woman had vanished. I sat behind the wheel and looked around. Car looked the same but felt different, like maybe it looked like a Corvette, but had been assembled on another planet.

I eased the seat forward, put the car into first and pulled back up onto the highway. After a couple of minutes of driving along and listening to the wind and J.'s snoring battling it out, I rummaged around in my tape case for something to take my mind off of the present. After a bit of vacillation trying to choose between Otis Redding or The Cure, I chose the latter. I listened along for a while and began to realize that most everything the lead singer had to say should be filed in the categories of "Depression" and "Weird," not that he had anything on me. I ejected the tape from the deck and then ejected it again from the car. I didn't think that listening to the pseudo-philosophical ramblings of someone who was more screwed up than me was exactly what my condition called for.

I looked over to where J. was slumped in slack-jawed unconsciousness and I wished I could think of some way to push her out of the car without killing her. I figured there had to be some speed at which she'd sort of skid gently to motionlessness, without sustaining permanent injury, but wasn't sure how to go about figuring out what it'd be. I knew I'd have to take into consideration speed, body weight, force of impact, trajectory, and road surface, i.e., texture: hardness, volume of broken glass, pebbles, metal shards

and other debris. And that was just the stuff I could think of. I knew in addition to these there would be other variables of which I was completely unaware. That's not exactly the kind of equations you deal with in college algebra.

One thing was certain, if I decided to shove that leviathan out of the car I would definitely need speed on my side, but as the highway department is so fond of pointing out, "Speed Kills." Of course lack of speed at the outset of, or any point in between, the middle of my exorcism of J. would probably have fatal consequences also, though not for her. So it was her or me, or her and me.

And just as I was about to give up, I saw the overpass.

## Chapter 19

Big, smooth, concrete and obviously designed by a someone who had, at one time or another, needed to make a 180 degree turn without sacrificing grace or velocity. If only life had been designed with similar features.

I hesitated for a second and then pulled the steering wheel to the right and exited. Immediately me and my unconscious burden were in a tight arc that curved around to the left and what had been eastbound was suddenly riding westward.

I tried to think what to tell J. in the event that she awoke to see the sun setting in blazing exultation to the east of Graceland and us, but gave up, deciding that if she did wake up I'd just have to hope for the best. Maybe the shock would kill her. This possibility pleased me so much that I offered a silent prayer to any interested party or parties that in the event of a combination untimely wake-up/demise on the part of J., I would crank this sucker back around and take her remains to Graceland.

The idea of depositing J.'s corpse at the gates of Graceland carried with it some obvious parallels to the commonly accepted destination of the soul that bordered on the mystical and that at the time seemed full of portent and power. I do believe that my sanity was falling victim to the road.

Evidently my supplication found no takers, and so on we drove, enveloped in silence and trailing a shadow that lengthened with the setting sun as if to mark, if only for a moment, our passing.

## Chapter 20

It was almost nine and the sun went down as it so often does. Then I settled down into a serious driving groove. We re-entered New Mexico, "The Land of Enchantment," while J. was in the land of sleep, and we were headed back to Arizona with California looming on some horizon beyond.

I had to stop for gas, but J. was gone like the dead and didn't wake up. I made a pit-stop a couple of hours past Milagro on Route 66, almost to Cline's Corners. After that I immediately made a wrong turn and didn't realize it until I stopped for gas again and found I had taken us to Encino. Two wrongs don't make a right, but three lefts do, and pretty soon we were cruising north on 41 en route to Moriarity. At Moriarity I took a left turn and pointed us back at Arizona.

Around 3:00 A.M., J. woke up.

For the past several hours I had begun to entertain the foolish hope that maybe she was so knocked out that she'd sleep straight through to Wide Ruin where I could leave her and continue on to somewhere near that Pacific Ocean. Oregon, maybe. Or Japan.

Didn't happen.

"Uuuuummm." Silence for a few seconds. "Where are we?"

"Beats me, I'm just a victim of circumstance. You're the pilot."

"What time is it?"

I looked at my watch. "Midnight," I lied.

"You've been driving for nine hours? You must be exhausted. I'll take over."

The truth of the matter is that I wasn't tired at all; I was wired to the gills wondering what J. was going to do to me when she woke to see those saguaro cacti leering at her from the side of the road. Vacation was about to end on an ugly note. If only she'd go back to sleep for a couple of minutes, and I could find another one of those overpasses like the one that started all of this trouble...

"Colin!"

"What?"

"I said pull over and let me drive for a while."

A request this wasn't, so I reluctantly complied. J. put the keys in the ignition and turned the car off. Then, taking the keys, she got out and walked around to driver's side.

I slid over noting that it was much easier this way. J. assumed the driving chores and I settled back into my seat. My teeth may have been chattering.

We drove for a couple of hours, talking about this and that but not saying anything and then J. spotted a pool of light off in the distance and said she would kill or die for a cup of coffee.

We weren't near any towns and it was just out there by itself, so I figured even if J. did tell someone where she thought we were going they wouldn't know from which direction we'd come.

We got closer, and a feeling of *deja vu* settled over me, which wasn't too strange, since I had been there before.



In horror and amazement I read the sign that couldn't have freaked me any more than if God himself had suddenly reared up from the ground in a cloud of brimstone with lightening crackling across his body and pointed at me shouting, "THERE'S THE SON-OF-A-BITCH NOW!"

The sign read: "Mike's Bike Extravaganza"; you can figure the rest.

J. slammed on the brakes and stopped under the sign, looking first at it, then at me and then back to the sign. Then very calmly and deliberately she said, "Before I break every last bone in your body and suck the marrow out, I want you to tell me what this diner is doing here."

If I didn't think well, I did think fast and I said that Mike's was probably some chain that was expanding into Texas, like us.

"A chain, huh?"

"Yeah, you know, like McDonald's," I said knowingly while I nodded my head for emphasis.

"McDonald's. Uh-huh. Okay, let's go to America's newest chain," J. said icily, "and see how McDonald's stacks up."

"Oh, that's a real bad idea. You know how bad that first place..."

It was no use, J. had already pulled up in front, parking exactly where we had that morning. We walked inside and there stood Mike his ownself, grinning from ear to ear. I thought he was going to hug us.

"Yep, just as I thought," I said before J. could say anything. "These places are all the same."

J. stared at me for a full minute while I tried to look sincerely confused.

"Give me a coffee, black, no sugar, to go," she said to the waitress, "and make it fast."

She stomped back out to the car.

## Chapter 21

We put in some hard driving for the rest of the night. For once, J. was the one who wouldn't talk. I tried to sleep but what with the wind and the choppy ride (built for speed not comfort) I hardly dozed off.

One interesting thing about J.'s driving was that she would never speed. I don't know if it had something to do with her law enforcement background or not, though I doubt it since that didn't stop her from doing much anything else. The sun came over the horizon and we stopped at a Diamond Shamrock for gas.

While J. looked after the car, I bought a cup of coffee and some doughnuts and walked back to the car, while J. pretended to flirt with the attendant and asked how far it was to Albuquerque. He was polite, but kept looking off as if he was judging the distance between himself and the door. It was hard to blame him, the past thirty-six hours hadn't been kind ones to J., and it was beginning to show.

Even though J. took a little more upkeep than I did, we both looked like a couple of refugees from Detroit. J. paid for the gas and a cup of coffee and we got back on the highway. I shared my doughnuts with her. We passed a billboard of Billy Stan Freeburgh, malignantly smiling down at the passers-by with his index finger raised in admonition. The day began afresh.

## Chapter 22

Two or three hours outside of Albuquerque, J. suddenly began talking again.

"I need make-up."

"Huh?" I asked.

"I need to stop somewhere and get some make-up." J. said with exaggerated patience.

We were blasting along, still headed east to the land of whose boundaries even the vultures skirted. I looked at J., wondering what made her think I even remotely cared. She continued, "It has to be someplace big, like a mall. I want to go to Saks or--."

"I'm not going anywhere near a mall with you," I said and looked back out the window at the telephone poles that rushed past like so many missed opportunities. J. didn't say anything after that and I thought that maybe she'd given up on the make-up thing, but as soon as we hit Albuquerque, she started scouting for a mall, and when she saw one pulled into the parking lot.

"This'll have to do," she said.

"What?"

"Come on, we're there."

Seeing nothing to gain by sitting in the car exposed to the afternoon sun and watchful eyes, while J.--and, more importantly, the keys--went into the mall, I started to get out but. then J. asked, "You staying? Fine. Want me to leave the keys so you can listen to the radio?"

My comatose hopes began to stir.

"Whatever." I tried to sound disinterested.

"Not a chance. See 'ya in a couple of hours." J. said over her shoulder as she walked off.

I watched her stride across the parking lot, surprised at how much distance each giant step ate up. J. was a force to be reckoned with. A strange force, but a force nonetheless.

I couldn't quite figure this penchant she had for dressing like she was going to a job interview or something. She could play the petite sexpot--well, okay not petite, but sexpot to a tee in a crowd of strangers, but one-on-one she took control. Totally.

I abandoned my thoughts on J.

During a momentary lapse of insanity I decided to call someone from home and see what, if anything, was going on. I didn't want to call Mom or Gianfranco. For some reason, ever since I'd stolen the car and the money, I felt a little more kindly disposed towards Ralph and had begun to call him, at least to myself, by his *nom de choix*, Gianfranco.

I finally decided to call James, a friend of mine from college.

"Colin? Man, where've you been?"

"Dark side of the moon."

"Well there's people looking all over for you. They're probably lookin' there for you now."

"Yeah, I'd guessed. Mom and Gianfranco?"

"Who?"

"Ralph. Mom and Ralph?"

"Who's John Frank?"

"Our gardener. From Italy, you two should get together."

"Uh, yeah, will do. And no, it wasn't your mom and dad or the gardener. It was two big burly guys. Dark car, dark suits, dark shades...Said they wanted to talk to you about your new car. I didn't know you got a new car."

"Uh, yeah, sort of..." I trailed off, wondering.

"You're always gettin' a new car..."

"Yeah."

"And I'm still drivin' the family stationwagon..."

"Uh-huh," I groaned.

"...that we used to take on vacation back in the seventies..."

"Well..."

"I wanna trade parents..."

"Okay."

"and then maybe I'll get a new car..."

I hung the phone up. Maybe calling James wasn't such a good idea after all. Pretty much all he did was sit in his room, smoke dope and watch cartoons all day long. But he didn't hallucinate two burly guys in dark suits. It sounded like Dale and Howard, two guys that were always hanging around my stepfather's office. They're the ones that got

this whole Gianfranco thing started in the first place. Gianfranco must have had them visit everyone I'd ever met. An idea had been tugging at the back of my mind during our exchange and now, with time to kill and J. the conqueror out of my sphere for at least another hour, I decided to try it.

I walked back to the car, got into the driver's seat and fumbled for the hood latch under the dash. I found it after about ten minutes and was rewarded with a heavy clunk as the hood released.

Getting out of the car, I went and stared in consternation down into the engine bay. The motor was crouched between the fenders like an iron spider, replete with a web of belts, wires and hoses that sprouted from every surface at different angles. Each and every part of that engine was a tangible reminder of my failure in high school Auto Shop Class. The horror.

I felt confident and a little vindicated in the knowledge that no one from this planet could stand in the presence of anything of such fugitive design and not be cowed. I was wrong.

"Problems?"

Hunched over as I was in engine induced apprehension, I sort of twisted around and looked over my left shoulder, squinting my eyes against the afternoon sun a la Quasimodo. When I saw who, or I should say what, was addressing me, I froze. Officer Friendly had materialized by my side.

"No, no, no problems." I blurted out.

"Why's the hood up, then?" He asked, understandably.

I stood there for a minute with the realization that life as I knew it had ended, not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with a question. Seemed reasonable enough to me.

Acceptance that I was about to be irrevocably smashed on the windshield of fate seemed to have a calming effect and I felt much better. I stood up and, turning around, addressed the policeman.

"Well, actually, I am having a bit of trouble. This bright red chunk of Americana here belongs to my uncle, an uncle that not only is unaware of its accompanying me to go shopping, but who will gladly kill me if he finds out. I lost the keys somewhere in the mall. So, I was wondering if you could help me start it?"

Against the backdrop of recent events, asking an officer of the law to help me steal a car seemed, well, normal. If I was going to steal a car, twice, it would certainly be this one.

I tried to give him a look that combined friendly boy-next-door honesty with good old down-home stupidity in one convenient package.

"I think I'd like to see your license right about now," he said.

My one shot having failed, I now realized with quite a bit of trepidation, that after he called in my license number and realized that not only had I already stolen this car, but was trying to include him in the festivities also, that things were about to get ugly. I was going to have spend the rest of my days in the big house where large men were going to give me prison tattoos with ball pen ink and make fun of me for not knowing how to hotwire a car, let alone not just shooting the cop and going about my business.



“Right now, to be exact, sir” he said with that fake politeness cops use and I realized that I had been standing motionless, staring at him with my mouth open and looking almost as guilty as I was.

I fished my wallet out and tried to hand him the whole thing, but he didn't take it.

"Hand me your license, sir."

When I opened it to get my license, he let out a low whistle when he saw how thick the bills were in it.

"That's a lot of money for a guy your age to be carrying."

"About 2,000.00," I said.

"That's a lot of money for a guy your age."

“Well, you know how it is, shop till you drop,” I said lifelessly.

"You should talk to my wife. Okay, uh, Colin, step over to the car, please."

We got into his car and I looked around. I was strangely calm. I was beginning to feel at home, sitting in the passenger seats of various vehicles with men I didn't know.

He punched my identification numbers into his computer. While we waited for the information to come up he baited me. I guess he was trying to do the "Good Cop/Bad Cop" routine by himself.

"The address on your license says you're from Dallas. You from Dallas, sir?"

"Yes."

"You're a long way from Kansas. You a runaway?"

Kansas? “What are you talking about?”

“I was making a joke, sir. You know, Dorothy? *The Wizard of Oz*?”

"Oh, a joke. No, I'm on vacation. Kansas wasn't included on the itinerary," I said.

"Vacation? What person in his right mind would want to vacation here?"

"What's sanity got to do with it?"

"Just answer the question, sir."

"Me. I'm visiting my uncle."

"I don't know, but it just seems kind of odd that a college kid would choose to spend his vacation here, even with his uncle."

"I'm kind of an odd person," I murmured, looking out the window. About that time the computer beeped and my entire driving record, which took four screens to accommodate, appeared. He whistled through his teeth again.

"Now that's what I call a lot of tickets. Your daddy must have a good lawyer."

"My dad is dead," I answered, looking him straight in the eye.

This bothered him more than I'd expected and he dropped the tough-guy act. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't of said that."

I shrugged my shoulders and looked back out the window. It didn't much matter and I figured that any time now he was going to get to the last screen and be informed that not only was my driving record as long as a sermon on Christmas, but that the latest addition held roughly the same standing in relation to the rest of my record that Christmas does to the rest of the year.

He cleared his throat, "Well, nothing much here. Let's go into the mall and see if your keys have been turned into security."

He cleared the screen.

I was barely listening. Some mistake had been made, and contrary to usual, it was in my favor. His computer either didn't have access to the Dallas Police Department files or, more unlikely, it just hadn't been updated yet. I didn't want to go into the mall, but didn't want to arouse anymore suspicion either, so I followed.

After deciding that I was involved in no wrongdoing, the cop got very chatty and introduced himself as "Wentworth, Ken."

I had completely forgotten about J. and as we entered Saks I was suddenly aware of a low buzzing noise inside the store.

Wentworth Ken and I rounded a corner and saw a large crowd milling around the make-up counter, talking excitedly. And then I saw why. Every orifice in my body clamped shut.

J. was sitting on a tall stool, right in the middle of everyone, getting a complete make-over. Problem was, instead of being dressed like her demure little self, she was dressed like a lumberjack. Boots, jeans, buffalo plaid shirt, the works.

I stopped dead in my tracks. I didn't think she could shock me anymore. That's one problem with thinking. Just as soon as you get an idea in your head, another one comes along and makes it obsolete. Others can do what they want, but as for me and my house, we will stop thinking.

Wentworth Ken just said, "Another one of those big city faggots. More and more of 'em everyday. Come out here to spread AIDS or something."

"She's not gay," I said absently.

"What? She who?" He asked suspiciously.

I froze for a second and then said, "Just a hunch." It sounded like a question. Wentworth Ken just snorted. "You had my job and saw the things I see, day in and day out, you wouldn't be so gullible."

We walked closer and I was praying J. wouldn't see me, so of course she did. I don't think reverse psychology would work on God, but sometimes... She also noticed Wentworth Ken by my side and tensed up. The girl that was applying the make-up observed this and said, "This is no time to get nervous now, I'm just about to apply the Tenacious Base Coat, that will make sure that your wife always appears cool and refreshed, whether she is or not..." Her voice trailed off in concentration.

For her part, J. looked ready to spring up and run at any moment and was controlling herself with some difficulty.

A short, balding man next to us shifted his weight and spoke to his wife "Loretta, I don't care if your nose falls off, all your teeth come out or anything else. If you ever ask me to go here or anywhere else and try on a bunch of make-up for you, your bags better be packed and the car runnin', 'cause I'm gonna kill you."

Loretta smiled and sighed a matronly sigh. "Harold, I wouldn't dream of that and you know it. You are far too much of a man," she said, rolling her eyes.

Overhearing this, another man nearby said, "I don't know, but he doesn't exactly look like the futile and frail type to me."

A woman standing next to him nodded. "He is kind of cute though," she said. "Even with make-up."

"Well, we're not accomplishing anything standing here watching the freak show. Let's go find your keys," Wentworth Ken said and walked off. I left with him, looking over my shoulder at J., who followed me with her eyes in the mirror.

We went down to the security office, and, after about fifteen minutes of fumbling around, the man in charge said that no one had turned anything in except a walking stick.

We looked all over the mall for the nonexistent keys--which began to get rather strange--because I started looking for them too. Eventually we gave up and, exiting another door, returned to the car.

"Well, sorry we couldn't find your keys. I'm not going to do anything about you taking your uncle's car and I'm not going to hotwire it for you. But," he said slyly and pointed down to the right side of the motor, "see that round thing bolted to the side of the engine?"

"Yeah?"

"That's the starter. See that big red wire and the small black one next to it?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, if you take a screwdriver and touch both of them where they connect to the starter at the same time, I think you'll be pleasantly surprised." He was smiling and nodding like a positive idiot now. He got in his car and waved.

"See 'ya around." He drove off.

"I'll be around." I felt like the earth had reversed its rotation, all screwed up and twisted.

I started laughing. I had my chance. I looked around the car but all I found was a quarter. It looked like it would bridge the gap perfectly.

I knocked the car out of gear and, making sure that my feet were clear in case it started to roll, jammed the quarter down onto the two terminals. The engine coughed once and then the quarter turned red hot. I yelled an obscenity at the top of my lungs and it lashed back at me from across the near empty parking lot.

An elderly couple walked by with disapproval in their eyes and I looked at my thumb, where I was greeted by the sight of George Washington's head in profile branded into my flesh. Looking closer I could just make out the word "YTREBIL," in perfect block letters.

I nodded to myself in sudden realization of the symmetry of it.

## Chapter 23

J. walked out of the mall, dressed to kill in a white linen caftan and sandals, came up to the car and informed me that I was a worthless no count jerk.

"What's the idea, huh? Where's the cop?" she asked, looking around the parking lot for surveillance vehicles or something.

"He's gone."

"Gone where? I hate cops."

"Uh, you're sort of a variation on that theme yourself," I reminded her. J. looked at me uncomprehendingly.

"What 'theme' exactly am I a 'variation of?'"

"Now that you mention it, several." Seeing that this didn't exactly smooth any ruffled feathers, I hurried on "You are a Game Warden, remember?"

"Well, that's different. We don't go around making people stop speeding or handing out parking tickets."

"No, you go around making sure that people only slaughter one specie of animals as opposed to another," I said. "And only at certain times of the year."

"There's a bit more to what I do than that--"

"I can imagine," I interrupted.

"But you still haven't told me what you and Dudley Do-right were doing in the mall," she finished.

"He thought I looked suspicious so--"

"He took you shopping."

"No. He thought I looked suspicious so he took me into the mall to ask security if I had done anything that they knew of. When they said no, he let me go."

This didn't entirely pacify her, but she accepted it. "Out of curiosity, what exactly prompted you to dress like Paul Bunyan before getting the makeover?" I asked.

"You know, if you'd think more, you'd ask a lot fewer questions."

"If I thought more, you wouldn't be here," I said.

"Well what do you think the general reaction would have been if I'd gone in dressed like this and asked for a makeover?"

"They'd have done it?"

"Precisely. And what do you think the general reaction would have been after the counter girl stripped all of my make-up off and seen me exactly as God made me?"

"Screaming hysterics?"

"Right. So, I went to the men's department first and bought some clothes, changed and went to the cosmetics counter to buy make-up for my wife. Smart, huh?"

I still had serious doubts about the intelligence of dressing like a woman, kidnapping a car thief, and heading for Graceland, but didn't mention them.

"Sure," I said.

"I also wanted to make sure that I didn't get caught again like we did at the Alamo, needing men's clothes and not having any."



While we were sitting there, Wentworth Ken drove up again and looking at J., asked me how things were going.

"Fine," I said.

"Made yourself a friend, have you?"

"Yeah, I guess you could put it that way."

J. wasn't saying or doing anything. She was hardly breathing.

"Did it work?" he asked cheerily.

"Not yet."

J. looked at me and I could see the muscles on the sides of her jaws clenching and releasing as she gritted her teeth. Wentworth Ken seemed interested in J. and looked at her closely.

"Have we met before, ma'am?" he asked.

"I don't believe we have," she returned shakily.

"You look awfully familiar," he said.

"Well, maybe you've seen her around," I said and gasped as J. grabbed my thigh with her right hand. I would have sworn that I could hear my femur cracking.

Wentworth Ken noticed that she had her hand on my leg and asked me why he might have seen her around. I don't know what it is, but something about life without parole hardens a man's sensibilities.

"Because this is my aunt and as you may have guessed, she lives here."

He started laughing and said, "Boy, your uncle's sure gonna be glad when you're gone."

"Me too," I said and as he drove off a voice in my head said something that I have since forgotten.

J. waited until he was gone and then said, "So, that's what he thought was so suspicious. You were trying to start the car. If he'd known how ignorant you are of most everything he'd have never worried about you trying to steal it. Don't try it again."

"Count on it," I said, looking at my seared thumb.

J. started the car put it in gear and we drove off, just me, my aunt, and my angst.

## Chapter 24

We stopped at a record store, and J. left me in the car while she looked around. She'd been gone for about twenty minutes and the sun was burning the nape of my neck.

One thing I had to say for her, if she'd been a lab rat they would've been proud of her. She learned quickly by trial and error. Instead of just the keys this time the coil wire accompanied her into the store. That way, she said, even if I did manage to hotwire the car without charring myself in the process, it still wouldn't start. She clearly didn't give me the same amount of credit for my abilities to learn from negative stimuli as I did her.

She came back out and I was fairly relieved to see that the store manager wasn't chasing her. She had a plastic bag full of tapes that I assumed she'd paid for. She dropped the sack behind the seat, replaced the coil wire, and got in.

I thought that we were leaving town, but instead, J. drove a few blocks over to some Italian restaurant and after parking the car, got out, yanked the coil wire off again, and walked inside.

I waited for a few seconds and then the door of the restaurant opened and J. stuck her arm out, motioning me inside. I sighed heavily.

I walked in and J. and I were shown a table. I looked around and, noting the well-appointed interior, reached the conclusion that this was the type of establishment that needn't worry about its clientele writing on the bathroom walls.

The *maitre'd* sneered condescendingly from behind his perch and after about fifteen minutes the waiter arrived, fashionably late.

"My name is Giani and I will be your waiter this evening. Will you and the gentleman be dining?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. J. and the waiter both looked at me.

"Yes, thank you," J. said.

"I'll give you a few minutes to look over the menu."

A little while later a surly guy that was about my age casually strolled over and set down two glasses of water, sloshing it all over the table cloth. We never saw him again.

After about ten more minutes, Gianni wandered back over to take our order.

"What will the lady be having today?"

"I think I'll have the veal marsala with a side of fettucine alfredo and scampi for an appetizer. Oh, and also a split of chianti."

"Uh, I think I'll just have a cheeseburger and water."

The waiter and J. looked at me like I was a leper. He stalled for another moment, to see if I was joking, and then left to fill the order. I heard laughter coming from the kitchen.

I looked across the table at J. and wondered why we were here. I had come to notice that J. rarely did anything for no reason. I didn't have long to wait.

"I've got a problem," she said.

I gave her a look I normally reserve for bodybuilders and other types of self-

created absurdities and cleared my throat politely. That old Sword of Damocles was clearly hanging over my head.

She seemed to be waiting for me to comment, so I didn't speak, move or think. After another pause, she continued:

"A problem that, frankly, I think you can help solve."

A fly buzzed around, noncommittally, and I, too, avoided eye contact. I faked a yawn.

My glass was running low on water and looked around for the waterboy, in vain, in vain. All in vain.

"Can you sing?"

"No," I lied, "tone deaf from birth. Tragic."

"That was more of a rhetorical question. You sing quite well. I've heard you."

"Fine, I can sing. So what?"

"Well, I'm sure you've noticed how many Elvis impersonators are working right now. And as far as I'm concerned that is a fantastic way to pay tribute to the King. You know what they say, 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.' "

"I didn't know they said that. Who exactly are 'they' anyway?"

J. rolled her eyes and continued. "Well, I really can't be impersonate Elvis. It's just impossible," she said, looking perplexed.

"That's the single most intelligent statement I've heard you make. You look

nothing like, uh, the King, and you're about as musically inclined as a car wreck. That's not to say you're not a wonderful--"

J. clamped her hand over my mouth to shut me up.

"That's not the reason," she hissed. "The reason is that Elvis was--is--a man," she finished, fairly dripping disappointment. "More to the point, he never wore women's clothing."

"That," I said, "is a matter of opinion."

J. cuffed me on the side of head, making my ears ring.

"Say something like that again and I'll break one of your fingers," she promised. I decided to get J.'s mind off of digital incapacitation and back on the Elvis predicament.

"So okay, what's the problem?" I felt that asking that was akin to lying down on the highway and sat, waiting for her next little surprise.

"Well, it's two-fold. First, of course, Elvis is--was--a man." She paused and I looked down at my hands. I decided that silence was the better part of valor. "And second, there's a million Elvis impersonators. They're all men too." She waited for me to grasp her point.

"True," I said. I felt like someone who is driving around, lost, in his own hometown.

"But," she said, pausing for effect, "there are absolutely no Priscilla Presley impersonators. Zero."

That statement, and the idea behind it, shrieked through my head like a thousand

channel broadcast.

I excused myself, went to the bathroom and caught Gianni leaning against a stall, smoking a joint. He tried to hide it, but I walked up to him, snatched it out of his hand and smoked the whole thing in five enormous hits. "Put it on the tab," I said.

## Chapter 25

I don't think I can give a very accurate portrayal of the rest of our repast, or the rest of the afternoon, for that matter. I do recall it being extremely pleasant.

J. evidently felt that I'd had enough abuse for one day and instead of putting in any hard driving, contented herself with adopting a leisurely pace and chattering along about any number of things that, as usual with her, had no basis in fact or reality. A little after dark we pulled into Milagro, found a motel and got a couple of rooms. I lay in bed and tried to figure a way out of my little predicament. Leaving was, I suppose, an option if I wanted to leave the car with J., which I didn't, and if I could think of any place to go, which I couldn't. She evidently trusted me enough by now to let me get my own room--I suppose the run in with Wentworth Ken took care of that. What she didn't know was that I'd been more afraid of him than her. Classic example of my life--layers and layers and somewhere, buried deep, a kernel of truth. Maybe. All I knew about the truth in this situation was that I was young, lost, and drunk most of the time. Not necessarily in that order. I tried to make myself pick up the phone and call my Mom or ex-girlfriend or anybody, but once again was surprised at how much effort it seemed to take. Too much.

I opened the chest of drawers in search of the ever present Gideon's Bible. I figured all that was lacking in making this a completely miserable evening was a little organized guilt. Read the Bible, maybe think about how life was when dad was still around. No Bible. I was a little relieved and shut the drawer.



I went out to the pool and sat down under a light, over by the NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY sign. I started feeling guilty for having money and cars and zero motivation to do anything. Sitting out there alone in an oasis surrounded by concrete, trimmed shrubs, trees, and manicured grass, I became mesmerized by the pool and the cool, blue water. Too cool and too blue to be real, I decided. It sort of scared me, but I'm not sure why.

I closed my eyes and different memories began to separate from each other, in no particular order, and I went along with them for some time.

When I opened my eyes the pool looked a little different. Before I could figure out in what way, an old man, obviously a street person, shuffled up to me and asked for a cigarette. I told him I didn't have any, but he kept on insisting, so I tried to give him five dollars.

He said he didn't want five dollars, he wanted a cigarette. Finally I got fed up with him and flagged down one of those cigarette girls, like you see in old movies, dressed up in a big cigarette carton so you couldn't even see her face, just this huge carton with a pair of legs sticking out. I asked for a carton of Merits, but she just laughed a little and gave me a pack of Old Gold. I handed them to the old man and he lit one up.

"What're you thinkin' about?"

"Nothing," I said.

"You're thinking, all the same."

"I was wondering why there aren't any mountains here."

"They're here all right, you just can't see 'em."

"Oh? Why not?"

He leaned toward me and he smelled like cheap wine and old sweat.

"Because they're all upside down." He leaned back, smiling, with a satisfied look on his face. Then he continued. "You know what their name is?"

"No." I was starting to wish he'd go away.

"Me neither." He started laughing at me and it made me really angry, and I pushed him in the pool. He couldn't swim and I wouldn't help and he splashed around for a while, and then it was all over.

He was floating three feet or so under the water, with his arms outstretched, like he was walking down a hall trying to touch both walls at once. I felt bad about it all of a sudden, so I sat down on the edge of the pool and dangled my feet in the water. I thought maybe if I swirled the water around with my legs I could make him move a little. Then I wouldn't feel so bad. The cigarette girl came up and took her costume off and she was young and pretty with blond hair and blue eyes.

She sat down beside me and we both looked down at him, shifting slowly as if to some lullaby we couldn't quite hear.

"I don't know why I did that," I heard myself say. I noticed she was smiling at me and breathing kind of hard. She stroked my leg gently.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "You did it because you wanted to."

I woke up with a start. Everything was just like it had been in my dream except there was no girl and from where I was sitting I couldn't see into the pool.

I got up very slowly, being careful not to look into the water and went back to my room turned the TV on to some religious show. There was Billy Stan Freeburgh railing

away and trying to tell me if I sent him some money, he'd fix it with God so that nothing bad would ever happen to me again and I'd get everything I wanted. I watched that whore all night long.

## Chapter 26

J. had evidently asked for wake-up calls because I most certainly got one. I had finally gone to sleep, though I don't know when. I woke up sore and cramped, still sitting in the chair in front of the TV.

I watched the static for a few minutes trying to figure out why they call it "white noise," but gave up.

I walked out to the pool and watched the steam rise off the water in the morning chill. Over by the chair where I had sat the night before, someone had left several beer cans and a crushed, empty cigarette pack. A spasm tore up my spine, and I bunched my shoulders against it.

J. stepped out of her room and we went to the restaurant for breakfast.

"Sleep good?"

"Yeah," I said, looking at the water.

"Think about what I mentioned yesterday?"

"I don't want to talk about that right now."

We passed the rest of our time in the restaurant more or less in silence. I felt considerably better than I had the night before, but I still felt pretty low.

## Chapter 27

After breakfast we loaded up and hit the road again. We drove for awhile with nothing much to see and nothing to talk about. And then, right outside of San Ignacio, we saw the wreck.

A huge billboard of a girl in a bikini, smearing sun tan oil all over her bronzed body, looked joyfully down on the mayhem. The caption, which I'm still trying to figure out read, "IT'S NOT ABOUT JUST DESSERTS!!"

From the looks of it, the guy driving had gone to sleep and hit the guard rail, rolling the car and thoroughly messing everyone in it up. We were the first ones on the scene and steam and smoke were still coming from the car.

"Oh no," J. said. She seemed genuinely concerned.

"Keep going."

"Are you crazy? Those people need help."

J. pulled the car over and we got out. J. was right, they did need help and after forcing myself to look at them as people, as opposed to one more impediment, I guess I was ready to help also.

It was a man and his wife and their two sons. The woman was talking to us about not having time to stop, and if we could help her get everything loaded back up and the kids in the car, then maybe they'd make it on time.

J. tried to explain to her that they'd had a wreck, but it didn't seem to sink in. The back of the car was covered with stickers from places like Six Flags and the Grand Canyon and I figured they were on vacation.

I had forgotten that some families actually took vacations together anymore. About the best we had ever done was take different taxis to the same airport.

The two boys were just kind of out of it. They didn't seem to be hurt or anything, and J. had taken them over to their mother, who was suddenly very angry. She busied herself dusting them off and asking if they were okay and was swearing to them by everything animate and otherwise that in about an hour and a half they'd catch a plane to Phoenix and leave What's-His-Name to explain the details. They didn't say much, although the younger one was crying a little.

I chalked all of their reactions down to shock. I guess the father was the one in need of the most attention because J. was crouched over him, alternately pushing on his chest, two short powerful movements, and giving him mouth-to-mouth.

"What's that woman doing to him?" the woman demanded.

"She's helping him, I guess. You were in a wreck. Go take care of those boys," I ordered.

She did what I told her to and then I was relieved to hear sirens off in the distance. I was watching J. work over the man and was struck by how efficient and caring she seemed. I guess anyone that big can't be all bad. Her wig was a little sideways on her head, and she had a runner in her stocking, but suddenly I felt very proud of her. Taking her to Graceland didn't seem like that big a sacrifice anymore, although I decided we'd

have to hit quite a few more car wrecks to convince me that being an Elvis impersonator was an idea worth considering.

The emergency vehicles rolled up and to my horror I noticed amongst the assorted vehicles there was a news team, complete with cameras and a van with a microwave dish. We were about to go live in front of I don't know how many people and my assumption was that J. wouldn't have time for a quick powder and hair realignment.

I was right. I swear the news crew was filming as they poured out the back of the van. They were like a bunch of honey bees on speed. There were only three of them, but they were like the loaves and fishes Jesus worked over--plenty and then some. The paramedics pushed J. aside and started checking out the father. After a couple of minutes one of them yelled at J. and asked her why she was doing CPR on a perfectly healthy, albeit dazed, man.

The reporter tried to get him to say something, but he was too mad. The paramedics were able to get rid of the reporter, so he streaked over to the furious mother and started firing questions at her at the rate of like, three thousand a minute, but she was crying too hard to talk coherently. I was next on his hit list and made a statement, in Spanish for some odd reason, before I even realized it.

I was beginning to notice that, when action was required of me either due to, or under stress, that the results usually came from deep, deep left field.

My interview went something like "Sir, are you related to the family?"

*"Chocalenta calcente por dos semanas."*

"What?!?" The reporter yelled.

"He said: 'Hot chocolate for two weeks,'" the camera man translated. They all looked at me.

"Tell the paramedics we have another zombie," the reporter said, and then he spotted J. sitting on the back of the Vette, smoking a cigarette and looking off past the horizon.

"Ah, miss, could I have word with you?" Evidently he had received so much negative reinforcement by this point that he was approaching J. very carefully, indeed, of course her size could have had some bearing on that also.

J. snapped back into the present and looked him over carefully. He and the other two members of the crew, who were looking over his shoulder, were sort of half-crouched in front of her, ready to run or report, which ever option seemed most prudent. Mass media's answer to the fight or flight instinct.

"What?"

"Would you mind if I asked you a couple of questions?" He licked his lips nervously.

"What kind of 'questions?'" J. asked.

"Like what happened here?"

"I don't know. We were driving by, saw the wreck and stopped."

"We? Who else was with you?" He asked.

J. motioned to me with her cigarette. All three of the news team looked at me, and then back to J., a little dubiously.

"We, ah, we thought he was in the wreck also," he finally said.



"He can give that impression."

"Well, um, it certainly was good of you people to stop and help this family," he started up hopefully.

"We're just on our way East. We saw the wreck and we stopped. He," she said, motioning to me, "is an Elvis impersonator."

The news crew turned as one and inspected me once again.

"I see," the reporter said.

"And, um, what do you do?" He asked J.

"Oh, I'm his, uh..."

"Yes?"

"I guess you would call me his..." J. was dragging it out and everyone, including me, was leaning forward to hear what she was going to say.

"I guess in polite company you would call me his..."

"Yes?"

Heavy breathing and licking of lips.

"...manager," she finished. Everyone kind of sagged in anti-climax and then she told the cameraman to get away from her with the camera because we had to go.

We got in the car and as we were pulling away the cameras were pointed at us and rolling and the reporter yelled:

"Where are you folks headed?"

"Graceland," J. said and then hit the accelerator and showered pebbles, bits of broken glass and other roadside flotsam and jetsam onto the astonished onlookers. An acrid, white smoke settled over the crowd and obscured them from our view.

## Chapter 28

"We made every major network," I said, looking up from the TV.

We were in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, the "No Tolerance" state, in the Plains Chapeau Motel and, contrary to what their license plates say, it was not "OK!"

"What?" J. had just gotten out of the shower and was now standing in a puddle and a towel. She needed a shave.

"Every major network. I knew we shouldn't have stopped."

"We had to. But how--"

"That little family unit just happened to be State Representative Billy Stan Freeburgh cum televangelist-on-the-rise traveling incognito looking for smut," I cut her off, looking back at the TV as yet another replay of J. crouching over the Representative was aired. It looked like a rape-in-progress.

"Looks like he found some," I finished grimly.

J. looked at the TV in disbelief.

"I knew there was something familiar about that guy. What'd you say he was doing?"

I ignored her question. "You probably thought he just looked like something you picked up in a bar one time or another."

"I told you I'm not gay. He does have nice sideburns though, add a couple of inches and they'd look like Elvis's."

"Why don't you call him up? After this he'll probably be looking for a job," I said.

"I mean, after he's had your tongue shoved half-way down his throat, how could he refuse?"

"Very funny. I can't believe I saved Billy Stan Freeburgh's life. God does move in mysterious ways. By the way, you gonna tell the manager what their sign means?"

"No, I'm not and yes, He does," I said, getting up to leave. "And another thing. You didn't 'save his life.' The paramedics said he was just disoriented." I walked to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to my room," I said. Dragging the Moral Majority to the brink, though not difficult, is tedious. The TV station replayed my interview. Hot chocolate for two weeks. Oh man.

"What's all that about 'Hot chocolate'?" J. asked me before I got out the door.

"One of only two things I learned in three years of Spanish classes. Good thing that's what came out."

"What was the other thing?"

"My pencil is big. Would you like to see my pencil?"

J. started laughing and sat down onto the bed. It was a couple of moments before she could talk.

"Yes, I think you're right. That statement would definitely have caused us some problems. They probably have a team of psychologists in Washington right now, pouring over what you said and trying to figure out just what you meant; is it a homosexual plot to

discredit Freeburgh? Was the car wreck planned by outside forces? And, and, dare I say it, does the slut have AIDS?" J. finished, laughing uncontrollably. It was funny seeing her like that and I fought, had been fighting, to keep from admitting to myself what I already knew. J. really was one hell of a girl.

"I'm glad you find it so amusing. Now me, I figure we're in pretty deep as it is, being on TV and all."

I was thinking again of Gianfranco and Dale and Howard, or Gino and Guido as he called them. I had been careful not to use any of my credit cards or do anything else to reveal my whereabouts, and now this had to happen. Dale and Howard, the idiot twins, were hired, nurtured and directed by Gianfranco, my loving stepfather. Their collective I.Q. was about seventeen and a half, but they were the kind of guys who didn't mind calling in to the home office for directions. Add to that the fact that they were built like refrigerators and things began to take a positive turn for the worse. They'd already been to see James, my friend at school, so I knew they were on the case, so to speak.

I got back to my room and noticed the light on the telephone was flashing. I read the directions on the phone. They informed me that when the light on the telephone was flashing, I had a message at the front desk; the number of times it flashed between pauses told you how many messages. Four. I called the front desk and asked if I had any messages. The girl said that three were from my mother and saying it was urgent that I call home. The fourth didn't leave a name or number. It just wanted to know if a guy and a woman in a red '66 Corvette was staying there, and if so, what was the address of the motel and our room number. She said she could give them the address but wasn't allowed

to disclose room numbers without the guest's permission. Did I want her to give it to them if they called again?

"No!" I yelled and hung up. I ran next door to J.'s room, but she didn't answer when I pounded on the door. The most revolting, disgusting music imaginable reached my ears and I turned slowly and looked across the parking lot. "Lounge" in blue neon met my eyes. Of course. It'd be about high time for J. to go to work. She was having to push hard to pay for our meals and rooms. I'd been paying for the gas--otherwise we couldn't have stopped at Diamond Shamrock's exclusively--but that was about it. How an Arizona game warden had become so proficient at dancing with drunk men while picking their pockets was a question beyond my powers of comprehension. Probably just as well.

I started across the parking lot and then stopped. What if Dale and Howard were already here? As soon as they saw me--or even J. for that matter--they'd move on us. I looked across the street and, of course, there was a Diamond Shamrock, a sort of combination restaurant/gift shop operation that sold everything. Having a sudden burst of desperation walked over and went inside.

I wasn't disappointed in the selection, and when I left I was the proud new owner of one pair of imitation leather cowboy boots, one pair of boot cut black jeans, one black, western cut shirt with red shoulder panels, slash pockets on the chest (complete with cowboys on horses lassoing imaginary dogies) and embroidered on the back, the Yellow Rose of Texas. I bought a straw hat with a quail-feather hatband. To complete my cruel ensemble I bought a belt with a buckle on it that looked like a hubcap. The manager threw in a string tie that consisted of a strap of black cord and a chunk of Lucite with a

rattlesnake head suspended in it, jaws gaping wide to show off its fangs to their best advantage. He said he was having trouble moving them.

Back at the room I forced myself into my new identity and surveyed the wreckage in the mirror. I looked like a Dale Evans acid-enhanced nightmare.

I took a deep breath and walked with purpose towards the bar sign that flashed across the parking lot.

I was almost there when, from the shadow of a Winnebago, out stepped the old woman from the desert. I stopped as if I'd hit the end of a rope.

While I waited for her to speak, I looked her over. All I could see of her clothes was a long black tunic, bound at the waist with a rope. She still appeared to be a thousand years old, but in the light of the full moon her skin looked soft and translucent, and her hair seemed to gather the pale light and hold it, as did her eyes.

"Do you know me?"

The question was as unexpected as it was sudden.

"Yeah, you're the lady who helped me in Arizona and New Mexico. How was Texas? You sure move--"

"Then why did you help that man on the road?"

"You mean Billy Stan Freeburgh--"

"Yes."

Now her eyes looked like those of a cat staring out from a darkness, two red circles of refracted light.

"We didn't know who it was."

"Would you have stopped if you had?"

I knew the answer she wanted, but I decided that with her, the truth was best.

"Yeah, I guess so. They needed some help."

She looked at me for a minute and then said, "Well, times change."

I nodded my head.

"Now, answer my first question. Do you know me?"

I shut-up and thought it over for a minute.

"No ma'am, I guess I don't."

She smiled.

"The two men who want to find you will be here soon. Stay with Julie."

"Thanks," I said. Then she reached toward me and handed me a black, flat-brimmed.

"Put this on," she said and turned to go.

Before I thought about it I blurted out, "Does Julie have a real, I mean, a man's name?"

The old woman stopped and looked me over once more. "Of course," she said and turned back around.

I didn't try to watch her go. At least I'd learned that much.



## Chapter 29

I tossed the straw hat aside and put the black on; then I walked into the bar. Any hopes I had of making a discreet entrance into the lounge vanished when I walked in. The girl charging cover looked at me and jerked her head back so hard that she hit it on the wall behind her, then got on the intercom and called for security, the manager, and a priest. Two of three came.

"What's goin' on here?" The manager, who looked like a cross between Lizzy Borden and a kangaroo wanted some answers.

"Nothing," I said, "Came in for a, a cold one and to uh, shoot some, um pool."

"Is there a full moon tonight? Huh? Is there? I swear, first that lumberjack lookin' bozo comes in and plays ten dollars worth a Elvis songs, and we only got three, and now you, you..." The security guard, who looked like something you'd find in a used pet store, had taken over briefly, but found that words failed him. I suspect the experience was not new to him so he just stood there with his hand on the butt of his revolver.

The manager took the helm again in what was beginning to resemble tag team interrogation.

"Well, alright. You can come in, but don't talk to anyone you don't know and don't cause any trouble. Oh, and stay away from the juke box!"

"Okay."

Once inside, I leaned my back against the wall. I looked out onto the dance floor, but didn't see J. with anyone. I checked all the couples at the tables, but once again didn't see her. There were four or five guys standing at the bar and sure enough, the Lumberjack lookin' bozo," turned out to be J. her own self. I couldn't believe it. Out in public and wearing men's clothes too. I walked over and took a stool next to her.

"Feeling okay?" I asked. J. gave me a puzzled look. When recognition made its entrance, she smiled at me.

"Maybe I should ask you the same thing," she said, looking me over. I decided to direct the conversation away from my fashion scream.

"What's with the outfit? I thought you had a moral objection to dressing like a man," I said.

"I wouldn't call it 'moral.' But I do object to wearing dirty clothes. That senator got dirt all over my dress, and the other one is filthy as well. I need a couple of new ones."

"Yeah, okay, we'll see what we can do," I said.

"And now, if you don't mind, what's with this get-up. Nice tie. Does it bite?"

"Uh, I don't think so. Look, we have a serious problem."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. My stepfather has two guys that do, odd jobs, for him. They work outside of the office, if you know what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean," J. said.

"My stepfather makes a lot of money. A whole lot of money. Problem is, he's real weird about it and no one in the family seems to know why. I mean, it's supposed to be legit--is, as far as I know--but he acts like it's gangland."

"Is this some kind of threat?" J. was acting cool, but I could tell she was getting a little mad.

"Yeah, sort of, but not like you're thinking. The guys-- twins actually--are looking for me, and today they called the motel. They know where we are. They're on their way."

"And you're giving me a chance to run, because you like me so much," J. said with sarcasm.

"No, I'm not. They are looking for me because I sort of don't own the car we're in," I said.

"Come again?"

About that time the girl at the front got on the intercom again and called for the manager and security. I could see the door in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar, and so, when Dale and Howard came in a couple of minutes later, I had my back to them. I was feeling very tense.

"There they are," I whispered. J. just sort of looked at me.

"So run to them. But if you tell the police I kidnapped you, I'll tell your stepfather that you offered to pay me to commit an indecent act with you, and that I accepted."

"You still don't get it. For starters, as long as he wasn't involved--or you couldn't prove that he was--you could tell my stepfather anything you wanted and he wouldn't care. Second, if I wanted those guys to recognize me I wouldn't be dressed like this," I

motioned to my outfit. "And third, if those guys do spot me, we're both in trouble." J.

thought about this a little and then said, "*Okay*, back to the car. You say you don't own the car? As in, you stole the car?"

"Well, I didn't exactly steal it, I traded something for it," I said.

"And what, exactly, did you trade for it?"

"My stepfather's Mercedes." J. absorbed this for a little bit and I watched the twins. They had taken a table and were carefully looking the crowd over, one person at a time. They hadn't seen us yet. J. cut in.

"You know, you are far less intelligent than I ever gave you credit for being. I mean, granted that shirt and the rest of that crap make you look pretty stupid, but all that can be taken off. No, your stupidity goes clean to the bone, doesn't it? Trading a Mercedes for a Corvette. They probably never even told your old man. I wonder how much money the salesman made off of you?"

"That doesn't seem very relevant right now. You don't like my clothes? That's okay. If Dale and Howard spot us they'll probably give us a couple of concrete overcoats and take us swimming."

"That doesn't make any sense at all. According to you, they're supposed to bring you home, not drown you."

"Yeah, well you never know. They aren't real bright and they see a lot of movies."

"Well, that makes little sense."

"I'd be hard pressed to tell you one thing that does make *much* sense," I said.

"Fine, we'll get out of here. I'm not all that tired and I'd like to get a little closer to Graceland anyway."

It was my turn to stare in disbelief.

"Graceland? Are you kidding? Every man, woman and child in America who watches TV knows that's where we're headed. The Republican party probably has hit squads mobilized in Tennessee right now, not to mention Gianfranco and his band of merry morons. It's over, got it? Graceland is out."

"John-who?"

"My stepfather."

J. looked thoughtful.

"What this party needs is a diversion," she said. The juke box cued up "Suspicious Minds," courtesy of J., for the twelfth time. I buried my face in my hands and hoped that when the end came, it would come swiftly and come surely.

## Chapter 30

I looked up in consternation, scared of what the mad J. was about to do and found myself gazing at a large, heretofore unnoticed moose head. He looked down from the wall, his regality undiminished though he was only twenty percent present. Not a bad showing. I wondered briefly how J. would look attached to a wall and smiled. Perhaps I'd spend the extra money and have just her skull mounted, the tasteful and understated "European Mount," that I so admired. My daydream was interrupted by J. leaning across the bar and asking the bartender if she could borrow the phone. He said no, there was a pay phone in the men's room that the customers were expected to use and not to stay on it more than three minutes.

I began to hope that whatever mayhem J. was planning would include the employees of this establishment, as I was beginning to feel the weight of their oppression. I needn't have worried. J. motioned for me to follow, and after she had made it to the restroom undetected, I did.

"Hello, Police? Yes, please transfer me to the Assistant Chief of Police. Thank you." She waited while the call was being transferred, then said, "Yes, this IS James Simpson. Yes, I know you don't know who I am. Anyway, I and a friend were just over at the Plains Chapeau Lounge enjoying a cocktail when two identical twins, dressed for a funeral, approached us and asked if we'd like to buy some nude photos of various and assorted elected officials. Naturally enough we were shocked and reported them to the

manager, but he merely laughed and said that if it weren't for the generous--I don't know, they just said 'elected officials,' no mention was made of civil servants. As I was saying, evidently the management is in on it too--And you don't care. Hmmm. Well he showed me one particularly provocative one involving what he said was the Chief of Police's wife and a couple of domestic--well, I don't know if was or not, I've never seen the strumpet. We're from Boise, Idaho. You will? Fine. The two, er, salesmen are seated in the Lounge. Yes, of course. My friend and I are dressed in identical Hawaiian plaid shirts and bermuda shorts. We'll be at the bar. Thank you." She hung up. "Well, they're on the way."

"Great. What do we do now?"

"I'm going to wait by the door and you're going back to the bar, so the twins don't recognize you. When the fun starts, walk outside, and I'll pick you up."

"You'd better," I said, having an unpleasant flashback to the night in New Mexico when I almost left her to the Bubba Pack.

I went back up to the bar and ordered a vodka tonic and waited. J. went up to the front and leaned against the wall, looking out into the street. After a few minutes, she perked up, then walked briskly outside to the accompaniment of screeching tires and bull horns. Deputies flooded in through every door, including the fire exit, and began rounding up employees. Four rushed the table where Guido and Gino were sitting and tackled them, yelling "Freeze" and other similar commands that are impossible to obey when one is in free-fall. I hesitated, drained my glass and headed out the front door. The

last thing I saw as I left was one of the twins staring at me and yelling in recognition. I tipped my hat and smiled.



## Chapter 31

J. picked me up as planned and we pulled out onto the highway. More squad cars were converging on the bar from every possible angle, as were TV crews. An involuntary shudder shook me violently.

"We need to ditch this car," J. said.

"What? No. No way."

"Everybody is looking for it." I had to agree with that, although it took an act of will, something that I'm splendidly ill-equipped for. This trip was getting further and further out of hand with every passing mile; we were definitely pushing the envelope of crazed road-trip technology.

All my real clothes, including all the yet-to-be-worn stuff from Banana Republic, had been abandoned at the motel. All I had were the clothes on my back. That the trunk contained a duffle bag with a little less than \$10,000.00 helped my state of mind, but didn't alter the fact that people were pulling up next to the car just to stare and point at me. For once people were ignoring J. in favor of gawking at me.

I didn't know how long it would take for the authorities--or at least what passed for them in this town--to figure out that they'd been had, but it couldn't be long. We were piling up some serious bad karma, and the fact that I don't believe in karma didn't help. I did not have a positive mental outlook. J. was talking.

"We don't have a choice, we've got to make a plan, think it through... oh, what's that?"

J. had been in the serious planning stage one minute and the next was peering at the Antioch Baptist Church where it looked like there was about to be a wedding. That or the Baptists had begun having Saturday night services for those sleepy-heads who couldn't make it for Sunday morning.

"What are you doing?" I asked as J. began to pull into the crowded parking lot.

She pulled around back and parked the car.

"I just love weddings."

## Chapter 32

She dragged me out of the car and pushed me toward the church. We walked into the back and J. signed the guest register. If signing it "Priscilla Presley" counts. It occurred to me that I seem to be a magnet for people who would prefer to be someone else. I was sort of getting caught up in the spirit of things so I signed in as Hank Williams.

The ceremony hadn't started, and most everyone turned to look at us as we came in. No one so much as batted an eye. We chose the bride's side because there were fewer people on it, and they seemed, on the whole, to be cleaner than the groom's support team.

We sat down and J. immediately began to tell me what changes she would have made in the wedding decorations, but I wasn't listening. We didn't have too long to wait before some pre-recorded music was started and the groomsmen and bridesmaids began to file down the aisle, walking slowly and grimacing in concentration as they tried to move in a stately manner to the front.

Next, a little girl came along with a basket of rose petals that she was supposed to sprinkle lightly and evenly for the bride to step on. Apparently, this didn't fit her program, because she didn't drop any of them until she got down to the front, where she up-ended the whole basket, leaving the petals in a mound in front of the preacher and the young, nervous-looking groom.

J. wasn't paying any attention to this though, because she was too busy eyeing the bridesmaid's dresses. She nudged me in the ribs.

"Those dresses aren't as bad as I would have guessed," she whispered.

"That's real comforting. Maybe they'll let you try one on after the wedding." J. didn't say anything to that and we sat there for a few more minutes discussing our options.

J. took the position that if the twins were really that big a threat, we should ditch the Corvette and get something a little more inconspicuous, maybe even something with a top.

I, on the other hand, though in full agreement, didn't feel that I was ready to part company with God yet.

We were left at an impasse. J. mused about how much more comfortable, not to mention drier, our trip would have been if I'd just kept Gianfranco's car. She said the thought that she missed an opportunity to roll through the gates of Graceland in a Mercedes was disheartening. I didn't commiserate.

"Do you think we could trade the Corvette for a Mercedes?"

"If I'd wanted a Mercedes, I would have kept the one I had," I said. "Besides anyone with a Mercedes isn't going to trade for a thirty some-odd year old Chevy."

"You did."

"Yeah, but it wasn't my Mercedes. It's easy to make a bad trade with someone else's stuff."

J. thought about this for a moment. "Did the Mercedes have a phone?"

"Yes, Julie, it had a phone."

"Aaarggh! We could have called ahead and let them know we're coming."

"They *do* know we're coming. Remember the wreck? The TV crews? The man you molested?"

"It was an honest mistake. Drop it."

The wedding still hadn't started and people were beginning to squirm around and make the muted sounds that a restless crowd makes. Everyone involved in the ceremony was present, except there were more groomsmen than bridesmaids and J. concluded that one of them must be late.

She went to investigate.

I stayed put and after reviewing my situation, decided that if I ever got back into any kind of sensible interaction with ordinary society again, I'd go for counseling. Out on a high speed run across four or five states—back and forth, mind you—in a stolen Corvette with a transvestite/game warden/Priscilla Presley wanna-be for a side kick—well, it wasn't like it counseling could hurt.

J. came back and said it was time to go. I'd given up questioning her on such mundane matters as the whereofs and the wherefores a long time ago. J.'s sense of timing and propriety just weren't in sync with the rest of humanity's.

We walked out to the car while J. cast furtive glances back over her shoulder from time to time. I knew something was up but just didn't have the heart to ask what. When she was positive no one was following us she gave me a conspiratorial look and said, "*Voila!*" J. held up a new dress for my inspection, a dress that just happened to look exactly like the ones the bridesmaids were wearing. She jerked it back down as a car

roared into the parking lot and stopped.

A flustered girl jumped out of the car and asked us if the wedding had started. We said no, they were waiting on the missing bridesmaid.

"That's me! Do you know where the dressing room is?" She asked us.

"Down the first hall on the left as you enter the building," J. said helpfully.

"Second door on the right."

"Do y'all go to church here?" she asked.

"Did once," J. said.

"Thanks!" She galloped off.

"Your dresses are divine," J. called after her.

## Chapter 33

We went straight to a gas station after ruining the wedding so that J. could put on her ill-gotten gain. Unfortunately it wasn't a Diamond Shamrock, and pretty much all they carried was automotive related. Nothing to buy. The attendant stared at me like I might be a shoplifter while I waited on J. to finish dressing.

She yelled from the bathroom that she needed a t-shirt. We didn't have anything in the car, but there was an auto parts store across the street, so I crossed over and went in. There wasn't much of a selection, but I bought the most tasteful one they had, which, unfortunately, wasn't very. It was bright purple, and had a drawing of guy hanging his head out the window of an eighteen-wheeler. The caption read "POTHOLE HURT MY NUTS!!" I never did figure out just what it was advertising.

I took it to the gas station and handed it to J. through the door. She came out looking slightly vexed. The dress that had looked moderate and stylish on the girls at the chapel looked horrendous on J.

There is nothing more unsettling than seeing two extremes portrayed by means of the same example. For starters, a hem length that was tasteful on girl-sized girls hit J. right above the kneecaps. Then, of course, there was the slight disparity in body shape and weight distribution between J. and most every female since the *homo africanus* model was phased out. J. was only able to get the zipper half-way closed before the huge muscles in

her back and arms impeded further progress. I would have laughed, but the spectacle was just too freakish.

I stood there feeling I should help, while J. fooled around with the dress, trying to somehow overcome the laws of nature, specifically those that pertain to mass and volume. She finally just rolled the top down around her waist and pulled the t-shirt on, ending up with a very eclectic look that matched mine in weirdness, point for point. We were a pair. In this, I found no comfort.



## Chapter 34

Repositioning herself into the netherworld of transvestitism made J.'s spirit soar. As for me, seeing her thus was just business as usual. I was past having any particularly negative reaction to seeing her dressed as a woman. In fact, I preferred that to her lumberjack outfit. I guess I'd degenerated to the point to where seeing her in drag--with a five o'clock shadow and the odd stray hair poking through her hose--seemed more normal than distressing. I guess oddness in such huge doses had an anesthetic effect on me. J. seemed at ease regardless of what gender she dressed as, but she obviously preferred women's clothes. This struck me as odd, because though I always treated her as though she was gay, she never really did anything to prove that she was or wasn't, seeming, if anything to be asexual. Probably better for everyone concerned.

We still hadn't come to a final decision so far the Vette was concerned. For all I could see the main problem wasn't, as I had previously thought, the law, but was my stepfather. As I said, it's funny how identical things can be so different.

I tried to figure if I'd exchanged one set of problems for another or just taken the ones I already had and given them growth hormones. J., as usual, wasn't the least bit concerned about the car or Gianfranco or anything else that wasn't involved with her triumphant cruise through the gates of Graceland, dressed like Priscilla Presley and evidently with me in tow, singing lead. I wondered if this was really my life, and if so, how'd it get so twisted?

## Chapter 35

Though my musings had been shadowy all along, darkness fell and we put some distance between ourselves and the scene of our last transgression. About 10 p.m. we stopped in Clearview, Oklahoma for gas and decided to call it a night. Or a day. Anyway, we got a motel and that was that.

I had been mulling our options over and decided that in the morning I'd take some of Gianfranco's advice. He always said that the best defense was a good offense. He's very original. Anyway, I figured after all the ones I'd committed that things should eventually begin to gel, and since things were as they were we could use a little information. With that decision behind me I lay on the bed, and surprised that I was much more tired than I'd thought, went immediately to sleep.

I woke up early and tried to figure what the best course of action would be. I could call another one of my friends, but the chances that any of them knew anything I didn't were slim. Same for probably everyone at his office. In spite of her calls, Mom was so far out of the question that she never even occurred to me. Then it hit me to go to the source. I'd call the man himself and see what gives. I used his one eight-hundred number.

"Transcontinental Conglomerate Incorporated, how may I direct your call?"

"Ralph Singleton, please," I said.

"I'm sorry, sir, there is no Ralph..."

"Betty, this is Colin."

"Colin! Where are you? They are looking all over for you," Betty said. Then in a conspiratorial voice, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Patch me through to Ralph, okay?"

"Okay, but you know he prefers to be called--"

"Gianfranco, I know. You're still Betty though, right?"

"Oh, of course. Your father--"

"Stepfather."

"Oops, stepfather. I'm sorry Colin. Anyway he said it was a good thing I don't have to give my name out on the phone. He said I have a 'blue collar' name," Betty said without malice.

"I think you have a lovely name," I said without conviction.

"Then why don't you ask me out?"

"You know why," I said. I hoped she did, because I sure didn't. She was about my age, maybe a little older and very attractive. Besides, she had her own convertible and she'd paid for it. Which may have been the problem. I liked Betty, but she fairly dripped responsibility. If I ever did ask her out it'd probably be the end. She dashed my hopes for an easy resolution all the same.

"No, Colin, I don't."

"Well, how about if I told you that right now I'm sharing the comforts of the road with a six-foot-three game warden from Arizona who likes to dress like a woman?"

"I'd say you're lying."

"Even if I told you I've been kidnapped?"

"Especially if you told me that. *You* stole the car, Colin. Not some Arizona game warden in drag."

"I'm telling the truth," I said.

"Drop dead. I'll put your call through," she said icily. I was put on hold for a couple of minutes during which I was subjected to a recorded bio of my stepfather which, for the most part, was totally bogus, unless the "Old Country" refers to Ohio.

"Gianfranco, here. Tell me your problems and watch me solve them."

"Colin here. Stole a car, picked up the world's strangest hitchhiker and am driving cross-country in search of the American Dream, sowing the seeds of discontent and reaping the whirlwind damn near every time my foot touches pavement," I said.

"Hang on a sec, Colin. I'm going to call that plebeian airhead and tell her to hold my calls."

The line went dead for a second, and round two of Ralph/Gianfranco's dream biography came back. It was pretty interesting hearing all about how he had organized the resistance movement in Italy during Mussolini's 'reign of terror' and had to be smuggled out of the country in the hold of a cargo ship bound for Albania. He must have been all of seven at the time. He was just beginning his epic traverse, which incidentally is still "sung about in all the small villages," of the Po River Valley when he got back on the phone.

"We know where you are. Gino and Guido are closing the gap."

"Who?"

"Guido and Gino. You know them, they're the twins. You always asked me what exactly it was they did for me," he said frostily.

"Did you get two new twins? The only ones I know anything about are named Dale and Howard..."

"Same twins. Only now they're named Gino and Guido."

"Ralph..."

"Gianfranco." He rolled his r's now. I sighed.

"Look, this *nom de office* thing has gotten totally out of hand. Why don't you just get some secret invisible playmate or something? Go to Italy, get it out of your system. What's Mom's name this week?"

"Same as always. She's worried sick about you, you ungrateful little wretch. Is that any way to pay me back for all the things I've given you and your mama? It hurts me here, in my heart. By the way, who's the bimbo who called the police on my boys?"

"Uh, whew. Good question. I'm still trying to figure that one out..."

"You took my money, you traded my bambino in on a twenty-five year old Chevy and now you call home for forgiveness. How have we come to this..."

"I didn't call home for forgiveness, I called home to see what you told the braindead buckaroos to do and tell you to make them go away," I said.

"Oh. Fine. Their orders, specifically, are to find you, drug you if necessary and bring you and that car that I had to pay for back to Dallas. That was really stupid getting on TV like that. Led us right to yourselves. That false clue about hot chocolate didn't fool

me for a minute. All we had to do was call a few motels and ask about that car. Two hours with AT&T and bingo, we knew right where to find you."

"How'd it go with the police?"

"They couldn't find any evidence. We're suing for false arrest. I'm gonna own that town."

"Yeah great. You need a town like that. You can change the name to 'Salerno.' Salerno, Oklahoma. Has a nice ring to it. You can have a statue of your travails in the Caucasus cast for the courthouse lawn, or something. Oh and thanks for the car."

"The car is in my name. If you don't meet Guido and Gino in Dallas within the next twenty-four hours I'm going to call the state troopers and report it stolen."

Ralph/Gianfranco hung up.

I put the phone receiver back into the cradle and stepped next door to J.'s room, where J. was idly filing her nails.

"What's the news?"

"Well, good and bad. The good news is that we are no longer driving a stolen car," I said. "My stepfather paid for it."

"Big of him. And the bad?"

"That in twenty-four hours he's going to report it stolen."

"So in twenty-four hours we're going to be driving a stolen a car again, huh?"

"Yeah, unless I take it back to Dallas and turn it over."

"Well, what it's going to be?"

"You giving me a choice?"

"Maybe. What happens if you don't take the car back?"

"Keep going till we get to Graceland," I said. "Or till we get caught."

"I mean what happens when you get back home?"

"If I go now, probably not much. Back to college maybe."

"And if you don't go now?"

"I honestly don't know. My Mom and my stepfather had a son a couple of years ago. He's always gotten the lion's share of the attention, but he's getting more and more recently. Gianfranco's been telling Mom that if I don't come around, he'll cut me out of the will."

"So? Wills can be contested. I'd think it's rare for a stepson to be entirely cut off."

"As rare as a game warden who knows as much as a North Dallas lawyer?"

Anyway, as I see it, getting cut out of the will is a distinct probability. I went too far this time."

J. looked at me to see what I was going to say next. When I didn't say anything she said: "Yeah, you get to choose. If you need to go, then go."

"Give me a minute," I said and stepped outside. I walked out into the parking lot and looked at the car. Making sure I kept my share of the will was a lot of incentive to just go back. If I played my cards right, acted real sorry and apologized for all the trouble I'd caused, I could stay in the will and probably keep the Vette too. That's what made the most sense. That was the only option that made any sense. My mind was pretty well made up, but I was still thinking about it when I remembered the old woman and then I saw her, standing out on the edge of the parking lot.

But now, unlike the other times I'd seen her, she looked frail and gray, a shadow of her former presence.

I walked over to her. She was hugging herself with both arms and staring at me. The light was gone from her eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Cold," she said. "It's so cold here."

"It's got to be a hundred degrees out here," I said. "You must have a fever." I moved to put my arm around her.

She pulled back from me. "Make your choice," she said.

I stared at her for a moment longer and I guess my decision was made before I consciously thought it. As I watched she began to visibly improve. She stood straighter and shook the tangles from her hair. The familiar light had returned to her eyes and she smiled. "Yes," she said. "Very well."

I walked back into J.'s room and she turned to face me. "Get in the car, chick."

"What?" J. asked.

"We goin' to Graceland."

J. nodded in approval.



## Chapter 36

We got in the car and pulled onto the highway, headed east. J. drove along, just over the speed limit.

"I think that gas we bought was watered down."

"I knew we should have held out for a Diamond Shamrock. What's wrong?"

"This car's missing worse than Jimmy Hoffa."

"Who?" I asked. J. looked at me. "Just kidding. I think he's pushing up the daisies in my stepfather's garden."

We both laughed and I began to notice that the car was running pretty bad. We were right on the outskirts of Checotah and decided to look for a mechanic. We didn't have just a whole lot of luck driving around, so we went to the first place we found, the Tampico Lounge/Motel on the south side of town, got a couple of rooms and went down to the restaurant to eat.

After an uneventful lunch that consisted of nothing I'd ever seen in any of the four food groups we went back to J.'s room and started calling garages.

It was after two p.m. by this time and after repeated failures, we finally found one that agreed to fix it that day.

It was supposed to be right off Main street and it was, but when we got there, it had a "Gone Fishing" sign on the door.

J. looked at her watch. "They're not going to catch anything this time of day." We went to a pay phone, but didn't have any quarters, so we wound up back at the room and started all over again. We tried for a little while longer, got bored and went out to eat at the Crazy Cow Buffet-Style Diner and then drove straight back to the motel. It was just getting on to twilight. J. called down to the front desk and the night clerk gave her a new number, which she dialed.

"You're not going to call, are you?"

"Yes I am. Why wouldn't I"

"Well, for starters it's after nine o'clock at night."

"So?"

"So they'll be closed," I said.

"So?" J. said, dialing the number.

"What?" The guy on the other end of the line yelled it so loud that I could hear him from across the room.

"Um, is this Phoenix Motor Works?" J. asked, making a face at me.

"Yeah, Mr. or Mrs...," the mechanic trailed off.

"Ms.," J. affirmed.

"Okay. What d'ya need?"

"Are you open?"

"Course I'm open. Would I be answering the phone if I wasn't open?"

"I don't know. What are your hours of operation?"

"Eight to six, six days a week," he said.

"And you're still open? It's after nine."

"Eight p.m. to six a.m.," he said gruffly, overemphasizing his p.m.'s. and his a.m.'s

"Isn't that kind of strange?" J. was having a hard time.

"Just ask him about the car," I said.

"Lady, do you have something in mind, or are you just gonna ask me stupid questions all night?"

"We have a '66 Corvette that needs a little attention. It's not firing on all eight cylinders. Maybe it needs a tune-up."

*We*, what's this "we" stuff, I was thinking.

"Maybe it needs a tune-up, maybe it needs a new engine. Maybe it needs a new owner. I don't s'pose I'll know until I see it, will I?"

"Well, I guess you won't. Where are you located?"

J. got the directions, scribbling them down on the back of a sanitary napkin she had in her purse "for the sake of authenticity," and we were off, me of the questionable intelligence and she of the dubious sanity.

We arrived at The Phoenix Motor Works about forty-five minutes later than we should have, due in part to J.'s lack of familiarity with the town and my reluctance to handle the directions physically. I attempted, with mixed results, to read them from the dash where I had immediately thrown them upon receipt from J., and this caused some awkwardness.

We eventually found the street and the garage thereon and knocked on the black metal door, three times with a long pause between each strike of fist to metal and three in rapid succession, as per our instructions.

A sliding peephole that was about six inches wide and two inches tall slid open and the same surly voice that we had had to put up with on the phone asked our business.

"What?"

"We just talked to you on the phone. We're in the Corvette," J. said.

"What Corvette?"

"The one that may need a tune-up, new engine, or new owner," J. said. It was a telling indication of our dependence on this clown that J. didn't kick the door in and conduct the conversation *tete a' tete*, so to speak. She was certainly capable.

"How do I know you're who you say you are?"

"What does it matter?" J. fairly screamed.

"Let me handle this," I said to J., then turning to the door I asked, "Would it be better if we came back after whatever drugs you're obviously taking have worn off?"

There was a long pause and then we heard the sound of an assortment of locks being opened and the door swung slowly inward. The mechanic was revealed and turned out to be a smallish man in his mid-thirties with sideburns that struggled down both sides of his face to the middle of his jaw, where they gave up the fight and lay, diminished and in defeat. He was wearing a work shirt that had "Michel" embroidered on it. I was a little disappointed that he didn't look like Lon Chaney and said so.

I was rewarded with strange looks all around. The mechanic spoke first.

"Did someone mention drugs?"

I looked around and wondered how I had ever allowed myself to get to such a strange pass; I suppose only my weakness had kept me going.

"No, not really," J. said.

"Oh," the mechanic seemed disappointed. "Really are here about fixing a car, huh?"

"Yes, we really are," J. said irritably.

"Whew. Well, bring it in." He stepped out of the door and waved us in, looking us over carefully. He whistled to himself as he eyed J.'s tee shirt and chiffon skirt approvingly.

We stepped out of the car. J. tried to explain what the car was doing, using a series of grunts, screeches and other primal noises that she seemed to think would put things into perspective. I looked around the garage, taking in the fact that there were no machines, no tools or anything else that most mechanics keep in their shops. Over in the far left corner of the shop there was something huge and bulbous that was completely hidden under an olive drab canvas tarp.

"Yeah, well, I hear what you're saying, but I'm not, um, accepting any work right this minute. As you can see I'm pretty full up." He motioned to the room with an expansive sweep of his right arm while J. and I tried to figure out what he planned on working on. I spoke up.

"Are you working on whatever is under that, uh, that..."

"Tarp?"

"Yeah, tarp," I said.

"Are you, maybe, interested in what is under that tarp?" He sounded like the Big Bad Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood. "Did you come to find out about what's under the tarp?"

I was starting to feel like LRRH, and was getting positively freaked by the whole scene and started to walk out the door, but J. caught me by the arm.

"Yeah, Michel," she said, "we came to talk about what you have under there."

He looked at J. for a second.

"Michel? Were you looking for Michel?"

"I thought you were him," J. said. When he didn't say anything she added, "Your shirt says 'Michel' on it."

"Oh, That's because it belongs to Michel. My name is Mervyn. All my shirts are dirty. You still want to look under the tarp?"

"Sure," J. said.

He smiled.

"Good. Come on, I'll show you." He led us over to where it seemed to skulk in the shadows and grabbed a corner of the fabric. A strong, musty odor pervaded the room and I was thinking to myself "Any moment now something's going to jump out from under there and rip my face off." He jerked the tarp back and our astonished eyes were met with what seemed to be acres of chrome shining dully under a thick layer of dust.

A 1959 Cadillac convertible had materialized like the Ghost of Conspicuous Consumption Past, and, frankly, it moved me. It felt like a homecoming of sorts. J.

seemed to feel its hypnotic power also as she walked slowly around it, running one long, perfectly manicured nail down the side, leaving a narrow swath of pink revealed like a freshly skinned grapefruit. J. hummed a few bars from "Hunk of Burning Love."

"So how do you like it?" Mervyn asked.

"How much?" J. returned as if in a trance.

"10,000 samoleans," he said. J. looked at me.

"What do you think?" She asked.

"We don't have that kind of money on us," I said with a twinge of guilt. It's telling of my all out enchantment for the Cadillac that I even thought about it all.

Mervyn walked over to a low coffee table and turned on a jam box to some classic rock station. He looked past me at the Vette.

"How about an even trade? I trade you a classic car that I personally guarantee to be completely free of defects of any kind for a Corvette that may, for all I know, be on its last legs. Huh? Whatd'ya think?"

"We don't have a title or any paper work on the Vette," I said.

"That's okay, neither does the Caddy! But hey, I've got a buddy that you can get in touch with tonight. Its a simple deal, you cough up two-hundred bucks and bam!, you get a title to the Cadillac."

"So, this friend of yours owns the car?" J. asked. Mervyn paused for a moment and appraised us once more.

"You guys didn't come from Max, did you?" Mervyn asked.

"No, I came from Dallas, and that" I said, pointing to J., "came from Rosie's Roadside Grill, a.k.a. The Portals of Hell. Who's Max?"

Mervyn looked us over again and it was clear he was sorting out his options. He'd already admitted he wasn't entirely legit, but he hadn't said anything downright incriminating. That was about to change. Finally he said "Well, I may be making a seriously bad career move here, but you two sure don't look like any cops I ever saw. Max is my business associate. We're in the business of providing quality automobiles for a reasonable price. We have a select clientele. Max's end of the partnership is in the area of acquisitions. I do the selling. And what's wrong with her, anyhow?" Mervyn motioned to J.

"So what you're telling me is that this car is probably stolen. Fine, that bothers me not one little bit. You also mentioned that for two hundred dollars your associate could provide a title. Great. As for her, I don't know what's wrong with her. Female trouble maybe. Maybe not. Personally, I think she just needs to find herself."

Mervyn looked at J. as if she were a side of beef and licked his lips.

"Maybe I have a better idea. Why don't you take the car and leave her. I can sell the Corvette and wire you the money after you've settled down somewhere. As for finding herself, she can do that right here. This is a real nice town. Not really big enough to lose much anything."

The thought of trading one road weary transvestite for a 1959 Cadillac in mint condition appealed to my emerging philosophy of Transitory Entropy, the main (in fact only) tenet of which is that, at any given time, physical existence has the



ability/probability to make a hard left turn headed for points unknown and deposit you in a situation in which your previous experiences have no connection or affiliation. Also, any decisions you make while in the realm of Transitory Entropy stand, and what's more, no one will be the wiser. They'll just think you screwed up all by yourself.

"Um, boys. Boys!" J. had something to say. "I don't mean to get in the way of all this fantasizing, but where he goes, I go." She was pointing at me.

"Now honey, let's not--"

"My name is not Honey and don't you--"

"Well, what is your name?" Mervyn interrupted.

"You may call me Ruth. Now where is the man with the title?"

Mervyn evidently saw the writing on the wall, and began to give me the directions to Basil's, a club where we would meet his "business associate," whose name Mervyn wouldn't divulge.

What he didn't see was J. take his jam-box and stow it in the back seat under some clothes she'd gotten out of the Corvette. I tossed the duffle bag with the money in it into the trunk. Then, we traded keys and knowing looks and J. and I left. And that was the last time I ever saw the Vette.

## Chapter 37

As for the Cadillac, it ran pretty good, but you could tell that it had been a while since it had been driven. We stopped at the first Diamond Shamrock we came to and made the attendant check the oil and tires and all that junk.

While he did that, I looked around inside. They didn't have the best selection I'd seen, but, compared to an ordinary gas station, they were still way ahead.

The attendant filled the car up with High Test unleaded, saying that it would burn cleaner. As it was, the car still smoked for a little while, and we could smell old oil heating up and dust billowed out behind like a cloud of bats while we drove around looking for the bar. We followed Mervyn's directions to a tee and still got lost. Despite her appearance and all the efforts she'd made to look and behave like a female, J. was like every man in the world in one respect. She'd have rather bled to death in a strange town looking for the hospital than stop and ask for directions.

## Chapter 38

After what seemed like years, we found Basil's. It was quite possibly the seediest looking place I've ever seen. If a big budget movie was going to be made about a bar where the law was outlawed it would have looked like this place. It was made out of cinder block and rusted metal. Burglar bars were installed over every opening for reasons which entirely escape me.

Maybe to make the clientele feel more at ease. Perhaps this was just a stopover for those weary souls bumping around between prison terms, a place meant to instill a homey, familiar setting for those who figure a life without bars is no life at all, only an interlude.

In any event J. and I were as out of place as Santa Claus at a bris. We went ahead and walked in, but had to stand just inside the doorway for a half a minute to let our eyes adjust to the oppressive darkness. The odor of stale beer and vomit swirled around us like mist off a cesspool. "Born to be Wild" was playing on the juke box, which J. immediately went and inspected.

"We are truly in Hell," J. said. "There isn't a single Elvis song on the juke box." So this place has that going for it, I thought to myself.

The bar was packed from end to end with the burliest, hairiest people I'd ever seen. Mixed bag. There was enough leather being worn to cover the floor of Texas Stadium, with plenty left over for the soda fountains. A neon sign over the bar said

"Leave Your Attitude at The Door," but was ignored by one and all.

I recognized immediately that large quantities of alcohol were in order and when our waitress stomped up to the table I was ready.

"Yeah?"

"Give me four shots of Jack Daniel's in a glass and whatever is the coldest beer you've got."

She didn't even blink.

"Fine. What do you want, Cinderella?" She seemed to have developed an immediate hatred for J.

"Bring me a glass of milk," J. said sweetly. The waitress just snorted and left. She brought our drinks back to the table and slammed them down, sloshing the contents over the sides of the glasses.

"That'll be eighteen dollars." J. gave her a twenty and she left. She didn't bother to return our change.

J. and I looked around, trying to figure out if the guy with the papers was in the bar yet, and if so, who he was. It was for this reason that I was surprised to turn around and find a tall, bird-like woman standing right next to our table, staring at us intently. She was dressed in a black leather motorcycle jacket, black jeans, and snakeskin cowboy boots. Maybe the fact that she and I were sort of dressed alike attracted her; I have no idea. No one spoke and then she just sat down and started talking.

"I don't what it was drawed me to him, well, I guess I do-- I guess it was his tattoos that really got me inersted at first, but there mighta been more to it than that..."

We were at the bar to pick up a title, but instead we had found a companion. I guess seeing us sitting there waiting for Mervyn's friend from the underworld to come and sell us the papers had triggered some buried, matronly instinct.

As usual, everything we were doing had the appearance of being one thing, and the reality, well, the reality was our own private label.

She said her name was Lucille and the miles lay on that woman like layers of asphalt on a county highway. Her age was hard to guess, but I put her at forty. In dog years. She ordered a double Black Jack and Coke. The maternal figures on my roster were piling up thicker than slime at a political rally.

"I've always been one of those hard-to-keep-down types, if you ask me. 'No regrets' is my motto. Why, I've ripped the rearview mirror off a every car I ever owned and some I didn't," she said, leaning back into her chair and studying us. "Anyway, back to them tatoos. He had all kinds of 'em. I met him at the diner I was workin' at--served him coffee and read them tatoos. Musta' cleaned that part of the counter he was sittin' at a hunnert times. Hank, he said his name was, and next week he was back, and I'll be if he didn't have my name in block letters on his arm. Musta gotten it off my name tag. So, we took up together. I guess you could say I was bit hasty, but somethin' about seein' my name on that man's arm made me wanna wiggle. Of course, like all men, he started goin' weird on me. He always had been a little funny. First time I saw him with his shirt off, I saw he had a big bull's eye tattooed right between his shoulders. That didn't really bother me none--I kinda liked th' colors and stuff. So things went on more or less like they

always do--go to work all day so's you can go home and drink a twelve pack. But then he came home one day with a new tatoo--'D.N.R.' it said. I figgered it was some ol' gal's initials an' I lit into him good--more outta habit'n anythin' else. 'Naw, honey' he hollered from the bathroom where he was hidin', 'ain't no gal's initials, it's a medical term... ol' doctor Sparks was talkin' about it t'other night at th' bar, said it stands for DO NOT RESUSCITATE. Well, that one threw me for a while, after I figger'd out what 'resuscitate' meant, but I guess it wasn't the worse thing I ever saw.

"He could tell I was gettin' jumpy, so he didn't do anythin' too strange for a while. Hung around the house, got a couple of skulls an' daggers and stuff like that put on various parts of hisself.

"Then, it happened. You ever notice that when a feller goes completely rabid it sorta happens slow for a while, and then just really happens?"

J. and I nodded in agreement. I didn't have a clue, but figured that eventually she'd get around to explaining it.

And she did. While she talked, she began to remind me of this story I read in a high school English class about this guy who kills a bird and then feels this need to go around telling people about all the bad things that had happened and how his life was you know, completely screwed up and stuff. I never had quite figured out the point of his story, but it seemed to be something like "You never know what's going to happen until it does, and maybe not even then," but maybe that wasn't it either. I never could see why he didn't just go buy another one, or something.

Lucille's chainsaw voice muscled its way into my head and put me back into my misery.

"So there I am one night at th' diner, sorta cleanin' the counter real good." She laughed and winked at J., "And in come Hank with this funny grin on his face, like he'd just drunk a pint of rot-gut or found a mess of baby possums. Then he sits down right next to th' guy I'm cleanin' around and puts his right leg on the counter, still grinnin' like God's own personal idiot. Well, I askes him what he wants, and he pulls off his shoe and sock. By now I figger he's on a six hour vacation with Jim Beam and friends. Then I look down and seen his newest tatoo. It started right in th' middle of the top a his foot and said: 'TAG GOES HERE,' and had this bright red arrow pointin' down to his big toe. 'Hank,' I said, 'that does it I'm leavin'.'

"But Lucille," he said. "You used to like them tatoos. Why shoot, when I got that one with your name put in my arm was when you 'cided to move in with me."

"That's right," I said. "And it's a good thing you got my name on your arm, cuz now you go back and have 'GONE FOREVER' put right under it. And leave I did, right then and there, just walked outta that cafe and down to the bus station... after gettin' a little travellin' change outta th' register, of course."

Lucille finished and took a drag off of her cigarette.

J.'s smoke had gone out due to neglect and I felt a sudden urge to take massive amounts of controlled substances. Anybody who says that drugs are abused by people who want to escape their lives is one hundred percent correct. I think some of us have earned that right.

I realized in one of those rare flashes of lucidity that, like the man who killed the bird, Lucille had singled us out for reasons only she could fathom and that she would stay with us until her plans had been realized.

"So what's y'all's story, anyhow?" Lucille was addressing us at random, looking from J. to me and back to J.

"Well, we're waiting here for a man that we bought a car from to meet us here with the title," J. said.

"Bought a stolen car, huh?"

"We most certainly did not buy anything stolen--" J. started but Lucille cut her off.

"Oh, of course not honey, why lotsa lawyers and banker-folk like to come down here to this here executive lounge. Hell, happens all the time, I 'magine."

I was beginning to see that Sarcasm and her truculent sister Brutality were Lucille's constant guides and companions. J. was taken aback and I could tell she was at a loss as to what to do.

If Lucille had been a man, J. probably would have just popped her in the mouth and that would have been that. As it was, J. could tell that Lucille was far too much the type of woman who, if challenged, would not only respond in like kind, but would win, though cities be leveled and multitudes slain. Lucille'd probably do the leveling and slaying whether it was necessary or not. I had to give Lucille credit for one thing and that was the fact that when she figured out J. wasn't going to do anything, she let it drop.

She wasn't looking for trouble, but she wouldn't run from it either. As for confrontation,



she couldn't have avoided it if she'd lived alone in a concrete bunker a thousand feet underground. Some people are born to it; can't and won't live any other way.

"Well, perhaps there is some question as to the whereabouts of the car's owner," J. allowed.

"That's more like it," Lucille said. "What this table needs is a little more honesty."

I was looking around the room for our "contact" as Mervyn at Phoenix Motor Works had chosen to call him. I had seen just enough spy movies to make me suspect that he'd arrived at least thirty minutes early so he could watch us and stuff, make sure we weren't with anyone else or talking into hidden microphones.

"Awright, your turn. Fess up and remember, I was cornerin' cowboys in the hog lot 'fore Woodstock, so tell th' truth."

"I'm sorry?" I asked.

"I can see that! You're skinny to boot. What I want know is what in th' world someone that looks like he just fell off the hood of a Lincoln town car deeeeluxe with a silver spoon in his mouth is doin' with Miss Pure Bred Lust here."

J. decided to intervene. "Not that it's any of your business, but we are en route to visit the home of the Eternal King of Rock and Roll, the Man Himself, Elvis D. Presley. If you have a problem with that, or wish to make any statement that casts aspersions on The King, I'll be forced to ignore my long standing rule against using violence and thrash you within an inch of your life, maybe less." J. finished her impassioned speech and sat back in her chair, breathing heavily.

Lucille didn't say anything for a long minute or two and when she did, she

sounded thoughtful.

"I never been talked to like that ever, not by man nor woman. I didn't never figger I'd ever let anyone, either. I still have half a mind to drag your ass outta here by that hank a hair on your head, and there's only one thing stoppin' me: what you did was in the Defense of The King." Lucille pulled another cigarette out of her case.

Less sincerity and thought have gone into the drafting of peace treaties than went into her last comment.

"But what does the 'D.' stand for? Elvis' middle name sure didn't start with no D," Lucille said. "It was Aaron. Elvis Aaron Presley. God bless him an' the Momma that bore him!"

"D Stands for Delightful," J. shot back. This pleased Lucille.

"I guess I'll just have to come along and pay my respects too."

J. and I looked at each other, and then I looked off out into the crowd. I knew there was nothing I could do to affect the outcome.

"Wait a minute," J. said. "You can't come to Graceland with us."

"Oh, sure I can, honey. I don't have no place to be for at least another forty-five years, maybe more if God ain't payin' any more attention'n He seems to be. Besides, I just wouldn't feel right 'bout lettin' you two run off in a stolen car without someone of my...experience... comin' long to help guide you through the trouble spots. And believe me darlin', there'd be lots of trouble spots."

Lucille's thinly-veiled threats were like the women's underwear section of the

Sears catalogue; they left a lot to the imagination, but not so much that you missed the point. J. certainly didn't miss it. She just shrugged her shoulders and said fine, come to Graceland with us, but I knew that she had put ditching Lucille into the top priority section of her brain.

"Now I s'pose y'all are waitin' on Mervyn's 'business associate' to appear outta nowhere and provide y'all with the magical papers that are gonna say you own a certain car?"

J. and I looked at Lucille.

"You know Mervyn?" I asked.

"Course I do, hon, everyone here knows Mervyn."

"How'd you know we're here to get a title from Mervyn's partner?" I asked.

"I bet you been to college. Am I right?"

"Well, yeah, I haven't finished or anything," I said.

"Well, good for you. Don't you even think 'bout finishin.' Them college teachers'll scramble your brains, and don't you think for one sec they won't, hon. It's their job. It don't make 'em bad people, jes makes 'em dangerous."

"What does this have to do with my car?"

"That car belong to you? Well, ain't you th' lucky one? I always wished I had a titty pink '59 Caddy to call my own," Lucille said wistfully. There was a second or two of silence during which certain things that had been floating around in my head suddenly slammed together.

"I don't suppose you're in 'acquisitions' are you?"

"Why, yes, you could call it that. I really like to call it stealin' though, m'self," Lucille seemed pleased that I'd finally figured out something all by myself. "My real name is Maxine, but you can call me Max," she finished.

"An alias. I see. So what's the news on the papers?" I asked.

"Couldn't get none. It'll take three, mebbe four days."

I didn't really have anything to say to that so I just sat there.

"Let's get out of here," J. said to me. Then turning to Max she said "We'll meet you back here in three days." We got up and walked out. On the way out the door I turned to see Max, sitting alone at our table, staring up to the ceiling, into darkness.

## Chapter 39

J. and I went back to the motel, and it was getting on towards eleven.

We went to our different rooms and I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I paced around for a while and then went outside. Across the street there was a Diamond Shamrock, so I walked on over and bought a twelve pack of beer. A sign on the door said that it was "a Class C Misdemeanor to drink on the premises," so I drank one and opened another and then started walking up the street.

About four beers later I came to a VFW hall that had this huge combat jet mounted on an iron post in one corner of the parking lot. It was about ten feet from the bottom of the jet to the ground. It had had its military markings covered over and "VFW" painted on the tail fin. I walked around and under it. On the bottom side of the left wing someone had scrawled "GOD IS JUSTICE AND LOVE" then directly underneath that "55--IT'S THE LAW," in magic marker.

I was getting pretty trashed by now, so I threw the twelve pack on top of the wing, for motivation, and then started looking for some way to climb up. I had about given up when I saw an old, metal garbage can at the far end of the parking lot. I walked over and got it. It was full, so I up-ended it and carried it over to the plane.

By standing on top of the can I was just able to reach the top of the wing and pulled myself up. I fished a beer out of the carton and stood there looking up at the stars that shone coldly like spikes against the enduring blackness, from somewhere else. I

started feeling a little dizzy so I sat down with my back against the cockpit and my legs stretched straight out, parallel to the wing. After a couple more beers, the thought occurred to me that to really get it right, I should sit inside the cockpit. After about fifteen minutes of struggling with it I finally pried the canopy open and climbed inside. Most of the instruments were gone and the rest were smashed and broken. One of the gauges that was left showed the profile of an airplane's wings superimposed over a straight, horizontal line. Looking at the wings in relation to the straight line was supposed to show the position of the plane. The left wing on the gauge tilted down at a crazy angle of about forty-five degrees. The compass pointed into darkness.

I drank another beer and wondered what logic carries an airplane through who knew how many combat missions and later, student pilots, in one piece so that it could wind up nailed down to a parking lot out in the middle of nowhere.

My thoughts got less and less focused until I finally dozed off for awhile and dreamed that I was walking through one of those French gardens that has everything just so, every tree, flower, and bush trimmed and forced into a symmetry of maddening exactitude. The farther I walked I began to notice that everything became more and more menacing. There was no breeze, nothing rustled in the bushes, no noise of anything, not even insect.

I came to a bush of black roses that partially hid a small, stone doorway in the wall of the garden. I went through the door and walked down flight after flight of stairs, while outside ages rolled by, and I knew cities were built, flourished, and then crumbled into dust. Far off down the stairs I saw a light growing larger and brighter, and the air

began to get humid and salty. Finally I came to the light and found it was coming through another door.

I stepped through it, out of the quiet of the tunnel and onto a deserted beach. The sand was burning hot and a deafening wind blew in off the sea, and I turned my back to try to escape, but there was nothing to shelter me, and the wind forced me to my knees and completely down to the sand. And still the wind blew, and my arms were stretched out in front of me, and the sand stripped the skin and muscle off my body, and still the wind blew.

And as I lay there the sand began to pile up around me and fill my rib-cage until only about half of my skeleton remained above the sand and I knew my bones would bleach in the sun for ages before anyone came to gather them up and take them back into the garden.

I forced myself awake and shook my head to clear it. I hadn't been asleep that long, but my legs and back were cramped, and the hangover was already starting to come on.

My watch said one-fifteen. I looked around the cockpit and up through the canopy, ran my fingers through my hair. The stars shone down colder than before.

## Chapter 40

The night ended rather badly, and I couldn't quite get back to sleep after my nightmare. I took the rest of the beer and sat out by the pool, thinking about how things were going and why, things I rarely thought about, although sometimes, looking out of the car while J. drove, I thought about the other times I'd driven down similar stretches of highway, past little crosses and bouquets of flowers left by the survivors of those lost to the road, and I'd think about how nothing ever really seemed changed. And at those times I felt like maybe I wasn't really in a car at all, that maybe I was sitting somewhere, quietly remembering another time or another trip. Then one look at what was driving the car would blast me back into reality.

So we drove on, through the country, past the vacant lots of dying towns and once, when we were lucky, past an abandoned drive-in theater, its screen strained drunkenly against the guy wires at an angle to the highway, as if leaning an attentive, albeit battered, ear to the murmurings of the road.

I wished I had some reason for this trip that would, if not make it seem right, at least make it understandable. I didn't. The best I could come up with for stealing a couple of cars and driving all over creation with a transvestite was that it really just didn't matter that much.

Gianfranco felt differently of course, but for him there was money and his rather twisted sense of family honor involved.



J.'s entire world seemed to revolve around Graceland. As for Max, maybe she felt that it was time for a change of scenery, I really never asked her. So out there by the pool my reasons all seemed tidy, if not typical.

Morning came, and I got up and went to my room, showered and put on my pshco-ranger costume. My rattlesnake head looked a little testy in his Lucite coffin, and I wondered aloud whose idea it had been to try to sell those things. Whoever it was, they'd sure had my number.

## Chapter 41

The motel offered a "Free All-U-Can-Eat Breakfast Buffet" to guests, and when I went to the dining room, I ran into J.

Getting a cup of coffee, I went to her table where she was reading a paper. She looked refreshed and I wondered if she ever had bad dreams.

"Hey," I said. She put down her paper and looked across the table at me. She was wearing half-glasses and looked sort of like a stern motherly type. The hair on the back of my neck resisted the urge to stand on end. She smiled and took a sip of orange juice.

"Good morning. Did we sleep tight?"

"No. I had...dreams."

"About Max?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Now, what are we going to do about Max?"

"Take her with us, I guess. What else can we do?"

"Ditch her somewhere."

"Ditching people who don't want to be ditched is harder to do than you think," I said. "Besides, why bother?"

J. didn't say anything, just put her coffee cup down and gazed at the pool outside.

Max didn't come up again after that and I went back to my room. I had stored the duffle bag containing my stash of money under the bed. Taking it out, I removed five

hundred dollars. I needed some new clothes, badly. I wanted to take the Cadillac, but naturally my guardian transvestite had the keys. I guess she figured that if she let me keep them I'd leave her. I guess she was right.

I was about to call a cab when I heard a knocking at my door. I went and opened it and there was J., showered, refreshed and ready to go.

"Let's go shopping," she said.

"You're reading my mind again."

## Chapter 42

J. was leery of driving the Cadillac until we got the fake papers, but she wanted to drive it so bad that we went ahead and took it to the Checotah mall anyway.

Because of our rather eclectic ensembles, we got quite a few looks apiece as we entered, but as soon as we got inside we split up. J. went off in search of a big department store, and I was looking for the most expensive place I could find.

I finally found a small store called Monte's, which carried, according to the sales clerk, "Only the best of the best."

The quality of their clothing was okay, but the price was just what I just looking for - sky-high.

I was scared to use my stepfather's credit cards now, I knew he'd have reported them stolen, so I fell back on cash and carry.

I picked out about three hundred dollars worth of slacks and shirts--or three pair of slacks and four shirts. The salesman asked me what I wanted to do with the clothes I'd worn in. It was clear that he thought they should be burned. It was also clear that though I had just spent a lot of money on clothes that he found much more suitable, the jury was still out concerning my judgment. I wanted to throw them away, but I also felt a strange attachment to them.

"I don't know. Throw them away...wait. Don't throw them away. Put them in with my other clothes," I said, and as he was about to comply I said "No, don't put them with the others. Put them, oh I don't know, put 'em in a separate bag."

He waited briefly to see if I would change my mind again, and when I didn't, he complied.

They didn't sell any shoes that I was interested in, so, barefoot and wearing a pair of khaki pants and a new button-down, I left. It was clear that, in his eyes at least, I was unrepentant.

I had to go downstairs to get to the shoe store. I discovered that an escalator can be unbelievably hard on bare feet, but I persevered. I had to wander around a bit, but I found one and went inside.

A smallish salesman in his late forties bustled up, shaking his head from side to side.

"May I help you sir?"

"I, uh need some shoes," I said, a little uncertainly.

"Yes sir." I'm not sure if this was agreement or compliance, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt. I bought three identical pairs, brown loafers with tassels, and left.

## Chapter 43

I walked around the mall some more and then decided to go wait in the car. I watched all the families bustling in and out of the mall entrance, chatting with each other or arguing or not really speaking much at all, and it all seemed so unfamiliar, I began to wish J. would hurry up.

After about fifteen more minutes of family watching, I spotted J. walking out of the mall, furtively glancing back over her shoulders. She labored towards me with a sort of jerky gait that made her look stiff or something. A couple of guys with walkie-talkies left the mall from different doors and were pacing briskly around, talking into their radios and looking all over the parking lot.

One of them spotted J., said something into his radio, and started running after her. She had a pretty good head start though and made it to the car, lurching and staggering like Quasimodo in drag.

She finally reached the car and fell over the back door into the seat, tossing me the keys in descent. I fired the car up and we sped away. In the rearview I saw more security guards converging on the parking lot. One sprinted diagonally across the lot, trying to cut us off at the exit, so I let him get in front of us, and then I wheeled the car in behind him and made a bee-line for the next exit down. I think maybe my sojourn in the VFW hall parking lot had bestowed some dog-fighting skills on me.

I looked into the backseat where J. was struggling into an upright position and could see that she had on about six different layers of clothes; one outfit per layer. I shook my head and drove us back to the motel.

There was a message for us at the front desk from Max.

We called her, and she said that she was still waiting for the papers to be finished, and that if we wanted to, we could go to the country club for dinner. J. asked Max how she had ever managed to become a member of a country club, and Max told her; she'd had an entire life story forged, from birth certificate to college diploma; the name she chose for this sham was Annabella Something or Other, and after Max told me and J. her "life story," I had to admit I'd have wanted her in my country club, too. She might be a car thief to us, Max said, but to the good folk at the Bayard Country Club, she was an Italian heiress with heavy connections in the Vatican.

We didn't really want to spend any time with Max, but I was kind of down, and J. said that going to a country club might cheer me up. I figured I'd at least see some people like I used to be around. I really didn't like rich, pretentious people, but I could relate to them. We decided to take Max up on her offer.

Max said she'd steal a nice car and pick us up around eight.

At five after eight, J. and I were sitting in her room, watching cable. We were also having an argument about whether or not we had to pay each time we switched channels.

The honking of a car horn interrupted us. When I looked out the window my heart about tore loose from my ribs. Gianfranco's black Mercedes was crouched like a beast of

prey outside the motel door. I ran to the bathroom and tried to wriggle out of a window that would have been too small for a mouse with latex bones. I was over and I knew it. About that time I recognized J. and Max's voices in the room.

"Well, where's the all-American boy off at now?"

"When you honked, he jumped up, took one look outside and then ran into the bathroom," I heard J. say.

There was silence for a moment while this information was assimilated, and then Max said thoughtfully, "He's sorta skittish, ain't he? You reckon its on account of me or you?"

"A little of both. He's led sort of a sheltered life," J. said. Concern oozed from her voice like blood from an icon. I got out of the tub, brushed myself off and walked into the room.

"Have both of you brushed your teeth?" I asked. They looked at me with one of those we-know-what-you're-up-to looks and then smiled smugly at each other. J. suggested that we quit wasting time and go to the country club. A sense of utter futility, combined with a feeling of mild anticipation, stole over me.

We walked out to the car, and with a shudder, I realized that my intuition had been right; this *was* Gianfranco's Mercedes. I didn't know how he'd managed it, but he obviously had somehow worked things so that J. and I fell right into his hands, via Max and The Phoenix Motor Works.

Gianfranco had been right all along when he used to tell me that with a little money and a lot of people working for you, you could accomplish anything.



I couldn't see through the tinted windows but didn't need to. I knew what was in there. I thought about running, but suddenly realized the hopelessness of it all and gave up.

Max smirked at me and, stepping in front of me, opened the back door, motioning me to get in. I stepped around the door and looked inside. Nothing.

"Where is he?"

"Who?" Max asked me.

"You know exactly who," I said, suddenly feeling hurt and betrayed, "Gianfranco." Max looked at me and then at J.

"John-what?"

"Franco. He's got this fixation that he, well we, are being chased by his father--" J. started.

"Stepfather," I corrected.

"Stepfather and a bunch of thugs," J. said lightly. "There were a couple of guys in a bar...but I'm not even sure they were after us, or anybody else."

"So why'd you run when I said they worked for Gianfranco?" I asked.

"Didn't want to risk it. But I haven't seen them in a while. What they're supposed to do to us when they catch us I haven't the foggiest."

"First thing they'll do to you is drag your ass down to the second-hand store and put you in a nice, pre-owned, leisure suit, if I have my way," I said through clenched teeth. J. tut-tutted me and Max looked at us both as if for the first time.

"Look, if you wanna have yoreselfs a little lover's spat, don't go off an' skip it on account a me. But I'm hungry as a chain gang wanderin' 'round in the desert, so I'm goin' to th' country club an' eat. Now, y'all comin' or goin'?"

J. was, I guess, about as hungry as I was, because she grabbed me by the arm and shoved me into the back seat of the death-car. Then she got in the front seat and looked at Max.

"We're coming."

## Chapter 44

The ride to the country club was pretty uneventful. J. and Max sat up front and tried to stump each other with Elvis trivia, and I sat in the back, looking around at the car, which was definitely Gianfranco's. I found one of his business cards stuffed down in the back seat, between the cushions. That day at North Dallas Classic Cars I thought I'd seen the last of this barge forever, and now here I was, riding to the High Plains CC in it.

I'd always thought life was an incredibly bad idea.

We got to the gates of the country club and when I saw the cattle guard, I knew we were in real trouble.

It was a little after dark now, and the entire grounds were lit up with those huge lights like they have out on the highway, the ones that cast that ghostly, blue-grey tint over everything. I don't know if that particular shade has a name, but I think it ought to be named "Hell Blue," or something. The gravel of the drive crunched like broken teeth under the tires of Gianfranco's car as we pulled into the valet parking.

A gardener was stomping around in what was supposed to be a flower bed, making desultory jabs with some pruning shears at this or that plant. When he saw us, he walked over and opened the doors of the car and then took the keys from Max and, without wiping his feet, got in. He pulled off to park it.

I looked at Max.

"When Gianfranco sees what you just let that guy do to his car, he's going to make a sizable deduction from your pay check. J. rolled her eyes, Max looked at me curiously and then she spoke very slowly, "Honey, if I hear just one more little ol' peep outta you about this John feller, I'm gonna take a chainsaw and trim you down a bit."

J. laughed a little and I shrugged my shoulders.

"Whatever. We can do it your way," I said.

We walked into the club house, which was actually a converted quonset hut, and looked around. I read in a bathroom somewhere that no one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public; I figure he'd been here.

J. turned up her nose and my hopes rose as I realized she was about to refuse to stay. Then she spotted a velvet painting of Elvis, dressed in a white jumpsuit like my grandfather used to mow in, and decided it wasn't all that bad. I gave up hope.

The *maitre'd* came up and seated us, calling Max "Annabella," and in general making a subservient fool out of himself. He mentioned how often he'd been going to mass. By his count about six hundred times.

"Well, I'm sure that's not nearly enough," Max said to him and winked at us when he slunk off. We watched him go. I hated him.

We were seated, according to the layout of the dining room, at a very good table. It was a lot bigger than the number in our party required. Several people looked at Max and pointed. Knowing glances were liberally applied.

J., ever the talkative sort, jumped right in.

"So Max, what's good here?"

"Well, honey, I'll tell you. The chicken-fried steak is good, the hamburger's better, and the fried catfish is to die for," Max said dreamily.

I checked the list. That didn't sound like the food offerings of any country club I'd ever been to. The waiter came back over, and Max ordered the fried catfish. So did J.

I ordered a martini. I didn't have a clue how it would fall out, but I wanted to be well fortified when Gianfranco and the dual dunces joined us. J. and Max talked for awhile about this and that and eventually started quizzing each other over Elvis trivia again.

My martini came in a tea glass. Instead of an olive, it had a lime in it.

The food came and one glance told me that it, at least, had been prepared by a master. I sat and ordered martini after martini and watched the doors, waiting for the end of the trip. Nothing happened other than J. and Max earning a new respect for each other. I earned a liquid lobotomy.

I looked over through a haze to where J. and Max were tearing into the food like a couple of deranged vultures. I ordered another martini. I could feel the gin-loonies trying to pry the lid off the top of my head.

"How come so quiet, hon? You still waitin' on them bad guys? I sure hope one of 'em has some interesting tatoos," Max said.

J. started laughing and said, "I guess it'll take 'em awhile, since we are in their car and all."

I didn't say anything. I thought maybe if I ever came into my trust fund--which at this point was highly unlikely--I might spring for a little brain augmentation surgery for

both my girls. Or maybe a little head ventilation via small arms fire. I saw great possibilities in both.

"What are you thinkin' about, darlin'?" Max was verbally assaulting me again.

I looked at her, or both hers actually, as my dinner was starting to catch up with me, and answered, "Uh, whew. Um, I was thinking, about, I was thinking about what I'd like to do for you guys. You've really been great."

J. and Max looked at me and smiled. "Yer drunk, hon," Max said.

"Completely gone, dear. It's time you laid off that stuff," J. finished for her.

"Besides, we have now come to the planning stage of the evening. It really is time we talked about getting the papers on the Cadillac."

"Say no more, doll, say no more. I rushed the printer, an' I got 'em right here in my purse. Y'all got th' two hunnert dollars?" I didn't say anything as I pulled out my wallet and counted out twelve or fifteen twenties and threw them across the table. Conversation was momentarily suspended in the dining room as the money floated in a see-saw motion gently down into Max's lap, around the table and onto catfish bones.

"Paid in full," J. said to Max. Then she turned to me. "Where'd you get that money?"

"I've had it," I said.

"All along?"

"All along." I pulled out a wad of twenties and hundreds and held it in front of J. and Max. "I've got enough unbacked federal reserve firepower here to kill me, put Max in a coma, and make Julie wear men's clothes."

"And you've let me, on my less than adequate income, pick the tab up for the last several days?"

"Well, I *am* the kidnappee," I said. "And you, are the kidnapper. I doubt that when the Lindbergh baby was nabbed he had to chip in for gas."

"Kidnapped?" Max's eyebrows rose.

"Well, it's not like I'm not at risk," J. said. "When I acquired you, you *were* driving a stolen car. If we'd gotten pulled over I could have gone to jail for that."

"Jail is nothing," I said. "I've been to jail and after the last few days it seems like a rest cure." I nodded my head.

"Let me get this straight," Max said. "You're a kidnapper and he's a kidnappee?"

"Forget it," J. growled. Max looked at me.

"Colin?"

"Well, I guess I'm not being kidnapped anymore."

J. gave me a kick under the table, but the alcohol protected me and I didn't feel it until the next day.

The waiter came over and asked if there was anything else we wanted. Max said no, and asked for the check. He said he could just put it on her tab and she said no, just put it on the table. He shrugged and walked off.

"Now, what about the car?" J. asked.

"I'll bring it by y'all's motel in th' mornin', hon and then it's Graceland Ho!"

I knew J. wanted the car tonight so we could see about getting rid of Max, but Max did, too, and she seemed unwilling to let that happen.

The check was brought out and put on the table. J. and Max glared at me. I sighed and pulled out my wallet. I looked at the bill and handed the waiter forty dollars.

"Thank you, sir," he gushed.

Why so polite, all of a sudden, I thought.

Max stared at me quizzically and then spoke.

"Uh, Colin, hon, it's your money and all, but would ya mind tellin' me one teensy eensy little thing?"

"What?"

"Why'd you just tip that boy forty dollars?"

"I didn't..."

"Colin here comes from the land of pretension, where they pay for their meals at the table," J. cut in.

"Oh. Well, that land of whatever ain't gonna float with Mary Lou up there at th' register," Max said. I'd never seen a country club that had a cash register, either.

We got up and walked to a counter by the exit, where I paid Mary Lou.

"Thank y'all so much," she said to no one in particular. Then she turned to me.

"Next time you come in here, you tip me off so's I can wait your table." I said the next time I came in there she wouldn't have time to wait on any tables because the Rapture would be kicking into high gear and she wouldn't want to miss that. She turned to Max.



"We don't believe in no Rapture, do we, Annabella?"

Max, a.k.a. Annabella, said no, we don't believe in no Rapture. She and the Pope had talked about it once or twice over a couple of cold frosties. Mary Lou turned to me with a smile.

"What pope was that?" I asked Max. Max jerked her head towards me.

"What?"

"His name? Which pope did you have the 'cold frosties' with?"

The color started to rise in Max's cheeks, and J. walked out the door, laughing. I was left alone with Mary Lou and Max. Suddenly, I hoped that Max really did know his name. Mary Lou looked at Max with the firm, steady gaze of a penitent.

"Well," Max said, "the POPE!" Mary Lou turned on me in triumph and said, "The Pope!"

"Oh, him," I said and walked out the door.

Max came out a few seconds behind me and, in the persona of Annabella, told the gardener to go get the car, which he did.

As the big Mercedes came around the corner, all the bad premonitions I'd had earlier came flooding back, and I suspiciously eyed J. and Max. The logistics of Gianfranco's being able to engineer Max's employment and subsequent entrapment of me were truly mind-boggling, and even in my drunken condition, I think I started to realize the impossibility of it.

The gardener opened the doors for us, and as I was about to get in, another car pulled into the drive. I glanced over my shoulder and saw a taxi with a couple of guys in

the back seat. Muffled shouts and bangings around emanated from the back of the cab. The occupants seemed to be having some trouble getting the doors open and were yelling at the driver to unlock them. Near as I could tell, he was yelling back to them something about money.

The whole scene was captivating on some primal level, I guess, because I couldn't take my eyes off it. Max yelled at me to quit messing around and get in the car. At that second the cabbie unlocked the doors, Max got out of the Mercedes to yell at me again, and the occupants of the taxi spilled out onto the ground. My worst nightmares were confirmed. Dale and Howard, or in the parlance of the enemy camp, Guido and Gino, were flailing around on the ground like a couple of coked-up game show hosts, screaming orders at me and each other, with a steady stream of imprecations at the cab driver, who was trying to back out and was hurling abuse at any and all.

I looked at Max, but before I could speak, she said "Honey, best ya' got in now. Them's the boys I stole this car from."

My grandfather used to say that one problem with being young is that no one can ever tell you something you don't already know. It seemed deep at the time. The twin terrors had managed to scramble to their collective feet just as J. reached out of the Mercedes and pulled me in. Max nailed it and headed for the cattle guard.

I looked back for Dale and Howard, but through the tinted glass of Gianfranco's car, I saw only my own reflection.

We drove in silence for a few minutes, and then Max spoke.

"Well, I sure did want to take this fine piece of steel through them gates of Graceland, but now we been made, best we ditch her."

I didn't say anything to that. J. cleared her throat.

"What do you mean by 'ditch' the car," she asked.

"Git rid of it. I don't know. Definitely burn it."

"Can't we just abandon it somewhere, like a mall or..."

"Where you got it?" I finished for her. They both looked at me.

"Nope. Can't just leave it somewhere. They'll find it," Max said.

"Oh yeah," I said, "good thinking. We better burn it, out here in the middle of nowhere, at night, so nobody'll ever find it."

Max didn't say anything.

"We can't do that, this car belongs to his father..."

"Stepfather," I interjected.

"Stepfather. Stealing it and letting them find it's one thing. Stealing it and melting it down's another."

"But I always destroy the evidence," Max said petulantly. "It's kind of my trademark."

"Not tonight," J. said.

## Chapter 45

We finally won Max over and agreed to abandon the car at the first crowded place we came to. We saw a cluster of lights, shining like an island in a stream of darkness. It was a few miles down the highway, and sure enough, when we got there, I recognized the three diamond logo of Diamond Shamrock. Home. No, more than home - sanctuary.

This was a big one and looked more like a small village than a gas station. I imagined that barefoot peasants ran to and fro, washing windows and pumping gas. Inside, merchants hawked their wares--anything one wanted. Looking around, I noticed a couple of women whose merchandise seemed to be available on more of a loan basis, only they got to keep the money. Truck drivers, the self-styled "knights of the road," swaggered around and swilled coffee from big, plastic tankards which were refilled endlessly by simpering wenches bedecked in polyester. And somewhere, hidden behind mirrored glass and steel security doors sat The Lord, ever watchful of his domain.

Max parked the car around back while I went in and bought a case of beer, a bottle of aspirin, and some non-essentials--socks, a hand mirror, a box of cookies, some deodorant, a pair of flip-flops. As I walked up to the counter I saw that they had one of those stainless steel food counters, about fifteen feet long, complete with infra red lights and everything, to keep the food warm. Or maybe to cook it. Anyway, in all that space all they had out was one turkey leg. It was dried and shriveled to the consistency of jerky.

I put my selections down on the counter and pulled out the Diamond Shamrock credit card. A hard edged waitress sauntered up to the register.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. I'd like a turkey leg, but could I get a fresh one?" "Well, the thing is, we gotta sell that one before I can make any more," she said.

"Don't be silly. That thing looks like it's been there two days," I said.

"Been there three, not counting yesterday. But it's store policy. I can't make another one till that leg right there sells," she said.

I pretended like the counter was full of assorted foodstuffs and couldn't tell which one she meant. "You mean that one right there, behind all that other stuff? That one's going to be mine?" She looked at me for a moment and then said "Well, if you buy it, yeah."

"Okay, I'll tell you what. You charge me for that chunk of leather-wrapped bone, twice. Then, I want you to throw it away and make me a fresh one, okay?"

"No, I can't do that neither. We're not allowed to throw food away," she said.

"You won't really be throwing food away, not really, because I'm going to pay for it. I'll pay twice. I just want a fresh one."

There was a small line starting to form behind me from which the assorted sounds of impatience were beginning to emanate.

"What would I tell Pat, I mean, Stan?"

"Who?" I asked.

"My boss."

"Tell him that a guy came in here, bought the antique turkey leg and asked you to wrap it up for him in a trash can," I said. "Tell him you were threatened. Tell him the entire Health Department came down here, did a Rockwell hardness test on it and said that it passed if it was for tank armor, but not for human consumption. Tell him whatever you have to get me a fresh turkey leg!" By the time I finished I was shouting.

"Well, I guess I can do that, but there are a few forms you'll have to fill out, so I can prove I didn't just throw it away."

I began to feel a slow rage building deep in the pit of my stomach and realized that if I didn't get control, it was entirely possible that a turkey leg was going to drive me to kill a counter girl. I reconnoitered and took the path of least resistance--you know, my usual *modus operandi*.

"Fine, I'll take that one, right there."

She sighed and got it out, but before she could wrap it up I said, "Don't. Just hand it over."

She reached over the counter with the turkey leg, which I took with my right hand, and gave her the credit card with my left. I made sure that the transactions were completed simultaneously.

While she ran my card through the machine I tapped the turkey leg on the counter and hummed "Lost Highway," 4-4 time.

Feet were shuffled behind me. The clock behind the counter ticked thunderously, like a metronome. Finally, the machine printed up my receipt, and I signed it.

When I got outside, J. and Max were waiting for me. Standing there, with a case of beer tucked under one arm and munching on a leg that looked like it'd been twisted off Ramses, I think they realized the vastness of the gulf that was fixed between us.

Max had put the car on the side of the parking lot that faced the highway, and they'd called a cab. When it arrived, we were all pleased to see that it wasn't the same driver we had seen at the country club.

Back at the motel we gathered in J.'s room, because it was late and all the bars were closed. It looked like Max would be accompanying us to Graceland after all and that J. was powerless to stop her. It seemed fair. They made our plans for the final push into Graceland, and we sat around and talked and drank. As the beer ran out Max began to get madder and madder.

When we were down to the last can her anger came to a head and she started ranting and raving about politicians and laws and policemen.

I asked her how she felt about game wardens, hoping to start a fight between her and J., but she just looked at me funny.

"They're fine, stupid," she said.

I said it just seemed like they were different sides of the same coin.

"No, they ain't. They get out there by themselves and they work. It's those lawmakers who just sit around and don't never do nothin' except think up rules they hold over our heads but don't never follow themselves that make me mad. It's just like right now, tonight. I got to sit in this room, or in some other, when I need to be out, drinkin'

with folks who'er like me. It's hard to follow a law that says you can't drink past two in the mornin', 'cause if you don't know yet, maybe someday you will, them's the hardest hours..." Max trailed off and looked out the window. Then she said: "You're young. And you're stupid. And you ain't reached that point of your life where you can see the light at the end of th' tunnel. But I have, and I don't want ta sleep any more'n I have to 'fore all that's taken out of my hands."

Max shoved herself up and out of the chair she'd been sitting in and stood in front of me and J., swaying slightly. She suddenly looked old and defeated. "I'll bring the papers for that Caddy 'round in the mornin'. Then we'll hit Graceland." Then she walked out the door.

J. watched her leave and then looked over at me; she laughed a little, but without sincerity. "Philosophical little tart, isn't she?"



## Chapter 46

We sat around for a little while longer and then I went to my room to try to get some sleep before tomorrow's drive.

I turned the light out and got into bed, thinking about all the latest developments and wondering how long it'd take the twins to find the Mercedes. I decided I'd call Betty in the morning and tell her where we'd left it. I'd also tell her that we were heading back, and to stop worrying about whether or not I was eating right and brushing my teeth regularly.

My thoughts faded to black and then a dream began to fall together. I was walking through a town by a sea. It was deserted, but looked like it had been abandoned only minutes before my arrival. As I walked past restaurants, I could see fresh food on the tables, steam rising off the plates. The cars were left running and vacant at signal lights. Stores and houses were standing open.

One house in particular caught my eye, so I went inside, down a flight of stairs and through a low hallway that opened into a subterranean cavern.

In the middle of the cave there was a pool of clear, cold water. There was a withered oak tree with an owl in the top branches, and looking higher, I could just see the night sky. A full moon bathed the cavern in cold, blue light.

I went to the edge of the water, looked into it. I could see the bottom clearly, but while I looked, I could just make out shapes darting and swimming around, but they

seemed always to be at the corner of my sight. When I tried to focus on one, it would disappear, only to be replaced by more at the edge of my peripheral vision.

I dove in.

I swam down toward the bottom, and as I descended, I began to make out a figure sitting cross-legged with its back to me. I swam around to the front of it. Then I was seated also, looking into the face of the old woman from the desert, wrapped in tattered clothes the color of coal. Her hands rested palm up in her lap.

I looked for whatever the things were I'd seen from the surface, but they were gone and then the old woman began to talk to me, but I couldn't make out what she was saying, though I knew it was important. The harder I tried, the less I could hear until all there was was the blood pounding in my temples.

She began to get more and more frustrated with me and finally stood up and walked across the bottom of the mere to a door I hadn't noticed before. I started to follow, but as she passed through, she shook her head no, and then she was gone. All that was left to mark her passing was a fine silt that drifted sluggishly in the water, and then settled.

I swam back to the surface and got out. Looking back down into the water, I couldn't see the door or where we'd sat, though the water was still and clear. I began to hear a shrieking off somewhere in the distance, getting louder and closer, making my head hurt until suddenly I woke to my own screaming.

I sat up in bed and shook my head to make the wailing go away, but when it wouldn't, I realized I was hearing sirens out on the highway.

I got up, turned the TV on and tuned it to a dead channel. I turned the volume up

as loud as it'd go and sat there the rest of the night, listening to the frenetic hissing and crackling, looking for shapes in the chaos on the screen.

## Chapter 47

Max called us at eight, and said she'd pick us up at ten or ten-thirty.

I called Betty to see which way the wind was blowing.

"Colin! Where are you?"

"I don't know, close to Hell or Tennessee," I said.

"Is there a difference?"

"Don't think so."

"Well, Gianfranco is furious with you." Then she giggled. "How'd you manage to steal his Mercedes again?"

"Huh?"

"You know, from Guido and Gino?"

"You mean Dale and Howard?"

"Well, yeah, um..." Betty trailed off nervously.

"Just did." I didn't want to explain about Max and get Betty all worked up and worrying. "What'd they have to say about that?"

"Oh, you know them. Gianfranco had to explain to them why he was mad. I swear I don't see how much stupidity got dumped into one family. Makes me think their Mom must have done something terrible in a former life. I bet she was a--"

"Betty!"

"I'm sorry, you know how carried away I get," she said.

"Got something a little more important than the vagaries of reincarnation going on here. *Capiche?*"

"Oh, no. Not you, too?" Betty asked.

"Sorry. Where are they now?"

"Don't know. Gianfranco told them to call soon as they found the car and we haven't heard from them yet. Guess they're still looking," Betty finished, thoughtfully.

"Well, if they call in, you tell them that I left the car at a big gas station out by the highway. I'm not going to say which. They need to sweat a little."

"Gotcha. Now, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm fine."

"Sorry about the other day. I shouldn't have gotten mad."

"Forget it."

"What are you going to do?"

"When I left, I was headed for Oregon."

Betty was silent while she digested this. Then she asked "Why?"

"Well, you know, I thought I'd go to my grandparent's--"

"You know that's senseless," Betty said, cutting me off. I thought about it and decided not to waste my time trying to explain.

"I'm going to the airport and catch a flight back to Dallas," I lied.

"That's wonderful! You're doing the right thing. Now, um, is this traveling companion of yours I've been hearing Guido and Gino jabbering about coming with you?" Betty asked slyly.

"No," I said. "She probably ought to go home too." "No chance of me getting to meet the woman who captured your--"

"No, I don't think this one's going to work out," I said.

"Oh well. Maybe another time."

"Yeah, another time. Look, I've gotta go. I'll see you soon." I hung up the phone.

## Chapter 48

Max arrived at ten-fifteen and by ten-thirty we were leaving the motel. J. suggested I pay for the rooms.

The top was down on the Cadillac and I got in the backseat, with Mervyn's jam-box. I popped in a tape that I figured J. and Max would hate, and we took off. We got on Route 66 and I saw that the Diamond Shamrock where we'd left the car at was coming up, and wondered if Guido and Gino had found it yet.

"Hey, Max, pull over. I need to get some stuff," I said.

"Let's drive a while. We can't be stoppin' and startin' if we expect to make any kind of time," she replied.

"Oh, come on. It'll take just a sec." we were really close now, and J., suddenly taking my side, said that we should stop and fill up. Get some coffee.

Max didn't say anything. She drove past the exit, and I saw why she didn't want to stop. Gianfranco's car was still there, but what had been a shiny, pretentious chunk of my stepfather's self-confidence the night before was now a still shouldering, burned-out shell this morning. The car looked like it'd been air-lifted out of Beirut. The windows were heat cracked and blackened by smoke, and the windshield was smashed out. All the paint was crinkled and curled off the metal, and the tires were completely burned up; even the wheels were melted flat where they rested on pavement.

J. and I just stared at it as we drove by, and then I noticed Guido and Gino, sitting on the ground. One of them was holding his head in his hands and the other was looking at the car and then over to a pay phone and back at the car. J. looked at Max.

"You want to explain this?"

"Explain what?" Max asked innocently.

"Explain why his father's car, which we left there in perfect condition last night, looks like Satan just made a beer run in it?" I could tell that J. wanted to break Max's back, and frankly, I wanted her to. This little lark of mine had suddenly taken on a whole new dimension. I had just stumbled across the Law of Hyper-Accelerated Devaluation. I'd never realized the jump between \$60,000 worth of car to twenty-five cents-a-pound junk steel could be so swift. Max looked at J.

"I thought it was his stepfather's," she said.

"Regardless, it's still a melted piece of junk," J. yelled.

"Guess some a them vandals got aholt of it, I don't know," Max said and looked out the window.

"Looks like you 'got aholt of it'," J. mimicked Max angrily. "We agreed not to destroy the car."

"I didn't do nothin' to that car 'cept to leave it," Max protested.

I tuned them out and tried to figure out how Gianfranco was going to take this. Not very well, I decided.



## Chapter 49

We drove for twenty or thirty minutes. J. was still mad and I could tell that it upset Max. My head was pounding from all the drinking I'd done the night before, and with the top off the car, and the sun beating down, I felt a little dizzy. Max turned around and said once more that she hadn't had anything to do with burning the car, and though I didn't believe her, it really didn't matter either.

I didn't answer her, but I'd been thinking about it since I saw the aftermath. On the one hand the car was gone and there was nothing I could do about it; on the other, I figured if she did torch it, she'd never have another opportunity to do that to me again, so why mess with it? Besides, regardless of what she did or didn't do, I was starting to realize it was all my fault.

"Forget about it," I said.

"What?" J. and Max asked simultaneously.

"Gianfranco's car. Forget about it. We're alive, it's dead, I'm yours. It was probably insured for twice its worth anyway."

J. didn't say anything, but Max seemed to relax and cheer up a little. She looked over at J., furtively, and seemed about to say something to her, but didn't. Instead, she glanced back over her shoulder at me.

"How come you was drinkin' so hard last night?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I mean, it's yer business and all, but it sure is a awful hard way for someone your age to live."

"You ought to know," J. said and looked at her. Max didn't answer, but looked at her for a moment.

"Yeah, I guess I do," she said in a quiet voice. "But I didn't never drink like that when I was his age," she finished a little angrily.

J. had stung her, that much was evident.

"Nothing else to do right now. If I go back to school, I might slow down," I said. "Maybe."

"Well, ya know drinkin' kills them brain cells," Max said as if she was confiding something. "Don't you never worry that you might kill so many of them cells you won't be able to learn no more?"

"No, I don't," I said, looking out at the country flashing past, just over the speed limit.

"Well, why not, hon? You gotta think about them things."

"Because of my theory of Cerebral Darwinism."

"Uh, come again?" I'd thrown her with that one.

"Cerebral Darwinism. You're familiar with Evolution Theory, aren't you?" I asked. Max nodded her head yes, and J. turned around in her seat to look at me.

"Well, my theory of Cerebral Darwinism is similar. Keep your eyes on the road. Basically, I accept as fact that flooding your brain with alcohol kills brain cells. But, I think that what happens then is a form of survival of the fittest. The weak brain cells die,

the strong survive. Therefore, by drinking like I do, I'm actually improving my chances of succeeding in college."

Max looked at me for a moment and then turned her attention back to the highway. J. was looking at me again.

"You've got problems, you know that?"

"Yeah."

"Big time," she said. Max looked over her shoulder at me. I was struck by how much younger she looked than from the night before. It was like getting out on the road was doing her some good. She looked, well, not exactly pretty, but not too bad, either. I dropped her age to thirty-eight. It occurred to me that Max was the kind of woman who was probably ignored in favor of the prettier girls in high school. Now, if she were to run into one of them, they'd both realize how Max had weathered the years better than they. She wore well.

Max looked at J. and commented on her make-up.

"What's wrong with it?" J. asked harshly.

"Well, nothin'. I was just wonderin' if maybe when we stop for lunch you could give me some pointers?"

J. looked at her and smiled a little.

"Yeah, sure. Why not?"

I shook my head as the implications of that hemmed me in.

## Chapter 50

We crossed into Arkansas at about one in the afternoon, and immediately stopped at a little barbecue joint right off the highway. There was nothing else around it and when we went in, it was empty except for the guy at the counter. "Help you folks?" He looked at J. as if he was wondering how many briskets he could carve out of her. "I got to warn you though, we're fresh out of barbecue," he said.

We stared at him and he burst out laughing. "It's a joke! Get it? A barbecue joint that is out of barbecue." He kept laughing until we all pretended to see the humor. "No really, what do you all want?"

We ordered a couple of sandwiches apiece, some french fries and sat down. J. also got apple cobbler.

"Okay, Max, what'd you have in mind?" J. asked. Max swallowed a big chunk of her sandwich and squinted at J.

"Mind about what?"

"Pointers? You wanted some pointers on how to do your make-up. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, you know, just how to put it on an' stuff like that, so it ain't so obvious," Max said.

"How to put it on?"

"Well, like you. I can put th' stuff on, but then I look like a Indian or somethin,' you know, on th' warpath. But you wear a lot a make-up, and it looks good. You wear a whole lot," Max said, looking at J. closely.

J. cleared her throat.

"I see. Well, yeah, I can probably help you out, give you some, uh, advice," J. said and Max nodded her head.

J. went out to the car to get her make-up bag, and when she returned they went to the ladies room.

While they were gone a bunch of highway workers came in. One of them walked up to me.

"You own that car out there?"

I nodded my head yes.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Bought it," I said. "Three years ago."

"How'd you ever get money enough to buy a car like that?" he asked suspiciously.

"Well, it is over thirty years old," I said.

"That means it's a classic." His friends nodded to each other in agreement. It was clear they suspected me. Of what, I wasn't sure.

"I washed dishes."

"You what?"

"Washed dishes."

"You made enough money washin' dishes to buy a Cadillac?"

"I was real good. What's the point of this, by the way?"

"My uncle used to have a car just like that one out there--"

"Was he a dishwasher?" I interrupted. The man looked at me in confusion for a second.

"No, he wasn't no dishwasher! He's a sheep rancher."

"There a lot of money in that?"

"In what?"

"Sheep ranching."

"Hell no!"

"Then how'd he afford the Cadillac?"

"I don't know. Anyway he had one just like that one."

"And?"

"And it got stolen a few months back. Six or seven, I forget which," he said. "You sure you didn't just sort of borrow that car, 'stead a washin' dishes?"

I started to feel very uncomfortable all at once, and realized that this is the way that killings happen. One minute you're lying about washing the dishes, the next you're at the City Morgue, being scrubbed down yourself.

"Quite sure," I said.

We stared at each other and my throat tightened up so I couldn't swallow. Salvation came in one of its stranger guises - my favorite transvestite and Max, the made-over car thief, who by the way, looked stunning. I dropped her age to thirty-two.

Several of the men whistled, and all of them stared, as J. and Max walked up.

"What's going on here?" J. asked.

The highwayman who'd been interrogating me looked up at her.

"You with him?"

"Yes. Is there something wrong?"

They all looked at her like they suspected she'd asked a trick question. He looked from me to J. and Max and back again. "Lord, there must be something real wrong," he said.

"He's laboring under the misconception that my car belongs to his uncle," I informed her.

Max wasn't saying anything, but looked pensive. The roadworker looked at Max and J., and finally stopped at me.

"I think we oughta call my uncle and have him come up here, take a look for hisself," he said.

His friends looked at each other and nodded their heads in agreement.

"Go ahead," J. said. Max punched her in the shoulder.

"I hate to break up your plans for a family reunion, but we are on a trip to visit the Eternal King of Rock and Roll," she said to no one in particular.

"Well, if you're in such a' all important hurry, why'd you order all that food," one of the men asked, pointing to the food on our table. He did have a rather salient point as all of us had ordered with a fair amount of exuberance. Max was silent.

"It was supposed to be to go," I said quickly. "Yeah," Max said. "It was s'posed to go."

"I think you ought to go call your uncle," J. said. "Be sure to tell him to run right up here, because you've got a problem with two women and a boy and you don't know how to handle it."

The roadworker in question, whose name I never caught, but whom I sometimes call Jack, looked at J.

"Lady, I--"

"Shut up. I can't believe that two defenseless women can't travel through Arkansas without being accosted by the likes of you. Evidently that movie—*Deliverance*—wasn't too far off track."

"Ma'am..." Several of Jack's friends were starting to look at him as if he'd tried to lift up a nun's skirt. J. continued.

"I never married and until this day I never regretted it. But now, here, in this barbecue joint where ladies clearly receive no quarter, and certainly no respect...What are you going to do next?" J. asked. "Make him squeal like a pig?" She motioned expansively towards me.

Jack's compadres were walking en masse out the door, muttering to themselves and leaving him to face J.'s tirade alone. I heard once something to the effect that there's nothing like the wrath of a woman scorned, and though J. was never closer to being a woman than a televangelist is to sincere, I think the analogy can be stretched to fit.

Jack's resolve to call his uncle withered in the face of J.'s indignation like cut grass in August. Maybe quicker. "Ma'am, I'm real sorry I ever said anything about it. Now that I think about, the color's different. I guess I'll be going now," he said. He hesitated a



second to see what J. would say, but she just looked at him. "You all have a nice day."

Jack left in full retreat.

"Well, that went off rather nicely, I think," J. whipped around and said brightly when she heard the door slam.

"Yeah," I said.

## Chapter 51

We hurried through lunch, got back into the car and for some odd reason, I was allowed to drive.

We'd been heading east on 66 and somehow I missed a sign, and the next thing I knew we were going down highway 71 headed for I don't know where.

J. was sitting up front. Evidently she had told her she was a game warden, because Max was grilling her about what it was like, was it exciting, dangerous and so on, which is probably why neither of them noticed that the traffic was getting scarcer and the road narrower.

As for myself, I was wrestling with the problem of how to get back on 66 without asking for J. or Max. I didn't know if there was a map in the glovebox or not, how to get to it if there was, and knew there was no way of getting it out and reading it without attracting any attention from the girls.

Speaking of which, things were getting weirder by the minute on that front also, as the more J. got into telling about her job as a protector of the wild, Max seemed to be getting more into J.

Max was leaning over the seat as close to J. as possible, staring at her and in short, looking like a schoolgirl in love.

I made eye contact with her once, but she looked off, blushed and pulled away from J., who just kept chatting away.

J. of the unknown last name, first female game warden of the state of Arizona. Man, was she laying it on thick.

As is common with me, I slowly began to get the picture. J. was enjoying the attention. I think J. had been as surprised as me when she redid Max's make-up and found a fairly, albeit rough, attractive woman under there. With a decent cut from one of the salons in Dallas, or some other bastion of pretentiousness, and a little guidance in the wardrobe department, Max would be pretty. In an earthy, frontier woman sort of way. I stopped thinking about things that'd never happen and revised my guess about her age to thirty. Then I tuned back into their conversation.

"Funniest thing that I ever saw in the field?" "Yeah," Max said. "I used to sit around the cafe and listen to them old boys talk about huntin' and fishin' and how dangerous it was... you know like Bambi's gonna come chargin' outta some thicket and maul a full grown man with a gun."

"Yeah, some of those guys take it a little more serious than's needed. I guess one of the funnier things I saw was a couple of years ago. It was about the middle of deer season and I was at this cafe back home called Rosie's." J. looked over at me and winked.

"You been there, Colin?" Max asked me.

"Yeah, it's his favorite place to stop. At least when his wanderings take him to Wide Ruin," J. said.

I hadn't said anything, but pretended to get real interested in the road. Of course, Max wasn't ready to let any detail of J.'s illustrious past lie unmolested.

"You like it too, huh? What's it like? What're the folks that go there like?"

"Weirdos, one and all," I said. "Going to Rosie's is like having coffee with all the people that tried to get on "America's Most Wanted" and were rejected. Breakfast at Rosie's is like going out with the girl of your dreams and finding out that the faraway look in her eyes is the result of heavy Thorazine and Shock Therapy."

Max suddenly lost interest, but I didn't.

"Rosie's is the place, ohh the place where all the nightmares come to play-ay-ay, and no one makes them go away-ay-ay..."

"Colin! Stop singing..."

"It was more of a chant, really," I said.

"Doesn't matter. You're scaring Max."

I caught Max's eyes in the mirror and did this thing with my eyebrows that makes them sort of go up and down, twice, real quick. She looked away.

"Relax, Max. I've left my axe somewhere towards the back, or maybe somewhere towards my past, which incidentally, tends to all run together..."

"Shut-up. Now. I mean it," J. said, and looking over at her I could see that she did.

"You were going to tell us a story," I said innocently. "The funniest thing your years as the Femme Pre-Eminent of the Arizona State Department of Wild-life has lavished on you."

"Forget it."

Max was ready for anything that'd shut me up, so she pressed J. to continue.

"You said you were at...that place, a couple of years ago and..." Max trailed off and I looked into the mirror again and saw that she was looking at me with a strange look

of fear and concern, probably trying to second guess the nature of my next tirade, but I felt all better, so I smiled a real smile at her and focused my attention on the road. J. took it from there.

"And these two guys came in, lugging all kinds of equipment, guns, bags, mosquito netting, two tents, a portable shower, a case of thirty-ought-six rounds, just everything. They looked like a walking L.L. Bean catalog. Well, everyone in Rosie's just stared at them.

"I still had on my uniform and one of them walked over and said hello, said he liked game wardens and could he buy my breakfast. I said no, but he paid for it anyway and when he walked off, I saw he'd left a hundred dollar bill next to my plate."

Max gasped. "What kind of food do they serve in there? They hirin'?"

Before J. could say anything Max laughed. "Okay, he tried to bribe ya'. What'd they say when ya' threw the money back in their faces?"

"I didn't," J. said. "I figured I'd need it for evidence in case anything happened."

"Yeah, right," I said.

"Oh," Max said.

"Anyway, as he was walking to their table, he said he knew that there'd be no trouble with the game warden. I decided right then that I'd camp out that night and find 'em first thing in the morning."

"And?" "And so I did. They set up camp in some trees and then set up a portable blind right out in the middle of a clearing not far from their camp. I'd figured they'd

probably shoot at anything that moved, so I brought along a video camera and set it up so I could record whatever they did.

"About an hour before sun-up they woke up and banged around for awhile and then I could see the beams of their flashlights bouncing towards their blind, where they settled in.

"I started the tape rolling and dozed off for awhile."

"And then what happened?"

"I woke up to the smell of fresh marijuana."

"Had you rolled into the fire?" I asked in mock concern.

"Colin!" Max yelled at me.

"Well how else did it get lit if J. was sleeping?"

J. quietly said that I knew it wasn't her marijuana.

"Yeah," Max said.

"So then you lumbered over to their blind and hogged all their dope, didn't you," I said.

J. ignored me. "I left the camera rolling because there was no way to prove they were smoking drugs as opposed to cigarettes--"

"Wimp," I said.

"Then they both went to sleep and this huge herd of deer walked right into the clearing, milled around the two hunters for awhile, ate, and then left. There must have been three or four big bucks and twelve or fourteen does."

"Weenie," I returned.

"What'd ya' do to them two hunters?" Max asked.

"I walked into their camp and sure enough there was marijuana in a little baggie, so I busted them for possession."

"Oh."

"When I got them down to the station I showed them the tape of them snoozing away while all the deer grazed around them."

"I bet they appreciated that."

## Chapter 52

J. noticed it was taking an awful long time to get to Memphis and promptly deduced out that we were lost. I stopped at a handy Diamond Shamrock and went to buy a map. It was, in contrast to our previous experiences, a small establishment, oddly specializing in gas and oil, with a smattering of office supplies.

There was a large, Brunhild-looking blond behind the counter and an older man with both his legs in casts sitting on a folding chair beside the coffee machine.

"I'd like to buy a map, please."

"Where you guys headed?" the girl asked.

"Well, Tennessee, among other places. Do you have one of those big road atlases, you know the kind that have about half the states in alphabetical order and the other half at random?"

"No, we didn't get none of those," she said.

"Well, give me a map of Tennessee then."

"Oh, that's just silly!" I decided that I hadn't heard what I'd just heard and shook my head.

"I'll tell ya how to git there. Now, you get back on this lil 'ol highway and you take the third exit you come to, maybe it's the fourth. You know it cus about three miles down it sorta dog legs back to the left. If it don't, then go on to the next one--"

"Miss--"



"Now you stay on that till you come to Farm Road 1164..." I had to stop her.

"I'll never remember all that. I'll just buy this map right here and--" She snatched the map away from and smiled at me like you do to an infant you're teasing. "Silly!"

I looked out to the car and J. and Max were looking in at me as if saying, "What's the problem?" Brunhild babbled on.

"I'll just draw you map."

She looked all over the counter and the store, then finally went into the back where I could hear her banging around. She came back after about five minutes with a piece of cardboard about a foot long and eight inches wide and went through the whole thing, explaining where to turn, what to look for, points of interest, drawing the whole time.

"There, she said. "Silly."

"Thanks, I'm sure--"

"Whatcha do is..."

Now, the old guy was involved. His casts clanked together as he tried to sit up straighter in his chair. "Get back onto the road out there..." I really did want to be polite.

"Take either the third, or the fourth, turn..." But he was talking real slow and deliberately.

"Then you go to Farm Road 1164..." Then he proceeded to run down through the whole thing. It seemed like hours passed.

"When you get back to the super..."

"Yes?"

"You just keep on trucking."

"Thank you sir, I'll do that."

"Silly."

"Just keep on trucking."

I stepped outside and looked at the "map." It had so many intersecting lines, arrows, X's, stars *et cetera*, that it made me dizzy to look at it. Evidently, the only thing Brunhild hadn't put on it was anything to indicate North. I went back to the car and explained to J. and Max that I'd been refused service, so we drove down the road a little farther to another gas station. I ran in and, refusing to speak, bought a map. And thus we got back on the right road.

## CHAPTER 53

We drove all day and when we stopped we were on the outskirts of Memphis. We found a cheap motel and got three separate rooms. I was paying for everything now. J. just scowled at me whenever I hesitated, and I was hitting my cash supply pretty hard.

I took a shower, dried off and then flipped the TV on. After a couple of minutes I heard a soft knock. It was Max.

"Can, uh, I come in for a sec?"

I opened the door a little wider then walked back into the room. Max followed me in and shut it, then sat down on the edge of the bed. I took the chair by the table.

"I gotta talk to somebody, and you're the only person I know here."

"What about Julie?"

"Well, it sorta involves her, you know what I mean?"

"You want to talk about her?"

"Not exactly, I just, well, yeah I guess I do."

"Well, you're already getting better at it."

"What?"

"Talking. You're not talking like such a, well, like such a hick anymore."

"I been listenin' to y'all. 'Sides I've been to school, too."

"What's the problem?"

"I don't have anybody I can talk to, not really, and figured you bein' from Dallas and all that you might--"

"--have noticed you drooling all over yourself every time Julie's around?"

Max looked embarrassed, and I almost felt sorry for her. She looked away.

"Yeah," she said hoarsely. Her face was red. "Well, now that you mention it, yes I have." "Uh, okay. Well then, what'd ya think it means?"

"That you are one sick individual."

"I was hopin' that bein' from a big city and all you might be a little less..."

"Quick to point out a pervert when I see one? Maybe if you'd been discreet about it, instead of dropping by my room to announce it...Nah, wouldn't have mattered. Would you mind leaving so I can scrub myself down with lye soap and Drano?"

Max had started to cry a little and got up to leave. I really thought she'd know I was joking.

"Sit down Max, I was just kidding. I don't think you're sick. I shouldn't have said that. I really was kidding."

"I don't know what I'm gonna do. I mean I said I'd give up on men, but I didn't mean..." She stopped suddenly. "You and Julie ain't...That's not why you said those things, is it?"

"No. Really, I was joking."

"What about you and Julie?"

"Nothing."

"Never?"

"Never."

Max didn't say anything but this was truly far and away too good to let pass.

"She may dress nice and apply her make-up with the hand of a virtuoso make-up *artiste*, but I can honestly say that Julie and I are just friends, and not very good ones at that," I said.

"Then why are y'all on this trip together?"

"That's a very long story."

"I've got time."

"No, you don't."

"But--"

"Suffice it to say that, all appearances aside, as a woman I've never found Julie attractive. Let me rephrase that. I've never found Julie attractive as a woman. For that matter, I've never found her attractive as a man, either."

"What're you talkin' about?"

"Julie. What are you talking about?"

"Julie. What am I gonna do?"

"What do you want to do?" I asked. "No specifics, please," I quickly added.

Max was bright red and looked like she was about to have a stroke. Maybe two.

"Lots of things. Sometimes I see her and I just want to run up and kiss her. Sometimes I think about goin' to dinner, you know, just me an' her. Mostly though I just wish I could drive around with her forever."

"Well, maybe you can," I said. "You never know about Julie."

"It's funny you said that. Sometimes I think she sorta feels th' same way's I do. You know her better though, is she... you know..."

"Not any more than you are."

"Not any more than I *was*. Or want to be. Or whatever. This is something I never even thought I'd ever have to think about," Max said. A single tear slid down her cheek.

"Maybe you won't have to," I said.

"That'd be worse."

"I don't mean like that. Let's say you um, girls, stay together after this trip. Let's say you go back to Arizona with her."

"Fat chance," Max said.

"For the purpose of argument."

"For the fun of it," Max returned.

"Well I'm all for fun. Anyway, J. lives alone. Didn't she tell you she had she had a cabin somewhere?"

"Yeah, it's a nice little two story log cabin that she built herself. It has a tin roof, and when it rains--"

"Well, you'd be alone out there, no prying neighbors, or much else. Go into town a couple of times a year, a little more, a little less... You two could probably sort things out pretty well."

Max thought it over.

"Yeah, I guess you might be right. Can I ask you somethin' personal?"

"I might not answer."

"Have you seen her, you know..."

"No, I don't know."

"Naked?"

"Oh that. No, not really. I did see her in her underwear once."

"And?"

"Well, it'll probably disappoint you..."

"What is it?"

"She didn't have a single tattoo," I said.

"Oh," Max said. Then she perked up. "That can be fixed."

## Chapter 54

The next day we got up bright and early and crossed the Mississippi River and into Graceland. Well, that's not entirely true. Memphis really, but all along I'd never been able to separate Graceland from Memphis. To me they were one whole, a complete package. In my mind's eye I'd pictured it as some special place that would be as different as the night from the day. Instead, Memphis looked like any of a hundred large cities I'd been in, cleaner than some, dirtier than most. We drove under a bridge where, evidently, someone had died. On the concrete abutment was spray painted "Steven Franklin, 9-25-92, R.I.P." Under that there were the names of, I guess, his friends and various mottos and slogans painted in all different colors, transforming the pillar into some sort of post-modern totem pole.

We drove by it in silence.

There was nothing to signify that the man J. and Max and millions of others worshipped had ever seen, let alone lived here.

I assumed we'd just go straight to Graceland and get it over with. Let J. do whatever it was she said she had to do--dressed like Priscilla, of course--and that would be that. However, when we got to Memphis neither of them seemed ready to finish it. J. insisted that we stay at the Peabody Hotel because she had heard it had ducks in the lobby. We went downtown, found The Peabody, confirmed the presence of the ducks, and checked in. Then we went out to eat.



After that we drove around, trying to figure out just what exactly the Army Corps of Engineers had envisioned when they laid out the streets. If the street system was intended to follow the general contours of the small intestine, then I guess they succeeded. In my opinion though, it's the most God-awful mess of intersecting roads and dead-ends I've ever seen.

We were lost in Memphis for the better of that day, but finally got back to the hotel in the early afternoon to take showers and naps and, in J.'s words, "Be fully prepared, both physically and mentally, for the fulfillment of a dream."

This "fulfillment" still didn't happen though, because J. and Max took a vote and decided that going the next morning would be best.

## Chapter 55

That night J. and Max wanted to go out. We went down to Beale Street and saw I don't know how many bars, most of which had someone at the door trying to entice us inside with offers of "no cover" or the "Best Blues on Beale," and though J. and Max didn't care, none of them felt right to me. We finally found ourselves at the far end of the street, in front of a little hole-in-the-wall, no-name bar. J. and Max wanted to go back up the street, but I knew this was the one. After talking it over, they decided to go in with me.

Inside, it looked like we'd been transported fifty years backwards in time and downward on the evolutionary scale. The bar was filled with smoke and lit by a few low wattage light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and a little bit by a sign over the bar that at one time had said "LIQUOR" in blue neon. Now all it said was "QUO." The silhouettes of people could be seen here and there. The concrete floor and walls were cracked and beaded with condensation, and it was obvious that some hard hours had been passed here.

J. and Max looked skeptical, but we were there, so we took a table in the corner and waited. A waitress walked over, took our drink order and never came back. This was repeated by two other girls. Finally J. got mad and stomped up to the bar to get them herself.

An old black man was stooped over a table next to ours and when J. walked past he said, "Merciful."

I stifled a yawn and the old man looked over at me and smiled.

"Ya' sleepy, huh?"

"Bored," I answered.

"Not used to such slow movin' times, eh?"

I tried to think of something to say that wouldn't be entirely rude, but gave up.

"Guess I'm just not ready for the grave."

"That so?"

"Yeah."

"Then you in the wrong place."

I didn't answer this time.

About that time, four skinny black guys and two big women strolled in, looked around, and then walked over to the man sitting next to us. They talked quietly for a few minutes and then walked into the back. When they came back they were lugging guitars, clarinets, saxophones, and all kinds of other stuff.

They got up on stage while a flurry of waitresses swarmed around them, stashing plastic cups half full of bourbon on any flat spot they could find that wasn't occupied by a musician or an instrument.

I ordered two drinks from a waitress as she whipped past me.

The band got busy setting up and after about fifteen minutes the lead singer stepped up to the microphone.

"Scuse me, folks."

And then they ripped into a two hour set that made me reevaluate my entire existence.

I've racked up hard time in a lot of clubs, usually drunk, sometimes not, but I've always paid attention to the band. If they suck I leave. This bunch, whose name I never caught, was unlike anything I'd ever heard. For starters, the lead singer had a voice that sounded like smoke, bourbon, sandpaper and molasses, backed up and driven by all the pain in the world. How a man that skinny could live with the weight of that voice was beyond me. The women sang back up, and swayed to the smoky rhythm in full, unblunted power that aroused every man in the house including, and perhaps, especially, me.

In my ignorance, I thought my experience with the Blues, most of which was confined to what is played in Deep Ellum, was vast. But the slicked up pretty boys of Dallas and Fort Worth, for all their posturing, wouldn't have stood a chance down here. The crowd was a gyrating mass of need, fueled by want and we locked into the band in a psychic feeding frenzy. Every note they threw out was snatched up, sucked dry and gone. Instead of satiation, the crowd thirsted for more. No, anyone from north of the Mississippi would have shriveled up and died on that stage, and that, at least, would have been fair.

During the break, the old man leaned over towards me.

"Hey boy! Still tryin' ta stay awake?"

"I'm up."

He looked at me, and then at my beer.

"Not hardly."

I went to the bar and yelled to the girl that I'd have what the band was drinking.

She looked doubtful, but poured me a drink out of a brown bottle that had the label torn off. I remembered those old westerns where everybody always has a bottle of whiskey on their table, and told her to give me the bottle.

"I can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"This stuff a dollar-fifty a shot," she said.

I pulled out a hundred dollar bill and put it on the counter.

She looked at it for a moment and then told me to wait and walked into the other room where the old man was. She leaned down close to him and said something, motioning back to me a couple of times. The old man glanced over at me, but it was too dark to see whether or not he said anything. She came back, pushed the money back to me and handed over the bottle.

"Goodbye," she said.

J. and Max lifted a couple of eyebrows apiece when I came back but didn't say anything.

The old man next to us looked me over as if for the first time and then motioned me to join him. I gathered up my bottle and two cups and went and sat at his table.

He poured a couple of drinks out of the bottle.

"If you gonna try ta keep up, you best off right here," he said. He also said his name was J.D. J.D. looked at me for a moment then said, "You ever wander around, 'lone

and lost?"

"Yeah, it's happened."

"Ever have a woman to help you through?"

"In what way?"

"Don't matter what way. Any way."

"Old woman?" J.D. smiled and leaned back. "She ain't *always* old." Then one of the singers cried out, and I and the rest of the crowd howled back, and as it all started again, I realized that until now, in all my life, I'd never seen real power walking unveiled.

## Chapter 56

That's the last thing that, in the strictest sense of the word, I remember. In the freeform, impressionistic sense of the word, there's much, much more.

Darkness and smoke, of course, and later, the wet, cold floor. But first was the feeling that something had cut the connection between my mind and body. J.D. poured and we both drank while the music throbbed through me, bridging the gap, caused by the whiskey, or whatever it was, between thinking and doing. My mind was filled with images of rivers and mud, God and pain, of slogging through stands of cypress trees while water splashed around my thighs and moss hung down to blind me, or to point the way. Dogs howled and children screamed and I thought about the pain, not just mine, or just anyone's, but all of it. And I figured that, until the end, I just wouldn't know much about it.

And I danced. Not well because I've never liked it, but with abandon and with women I'd never seen enter, who'd come with men who just laughed and clapped and poured more drinks.

And J. and Max were there to the end, though for me just in flashes, and always watching, and always holding hands.

Every now and then, when I whirled past the table, I'd see J.D. laughing, and pouring more whiskey and always yelling at me to keep up.

And then the night closed in and the music faded away and I was on the floor with my ear pressed to the concrete, listening to the throb of the city mingled with the wash of blood pumping slowly through my veins and I sank down and down, deeper than I'd ever gone.



## Chapter 57

There's nothing quite like a whiskey hang-over. Some liquors—like rum--cause more pain, but none has the tenacity of whiskey.

J. and Max came down to my room around seven or so and started banging on the door. I answered around nine or ten.

"Well, if it isn't John Barleycorn," J. snorted.

"Aaagh," I said.

"How do you feel?" Max asked.

"How do I look?"

"I was hopin' you felt bettern' that," Max said.

"Graceland's off for this morning," J. said. "I'm going to go look for something to accentuate my outfit so it'll be perfect."

Max looked at J. lovingly.

"You brought a special outfit just for the tour?"

"Of course," J. said.

Max looked down at her faded jeans and wrinkled shirt.

"Oh."

She bit her lip. I was too hungover to withstand any more pain, even if it was someone else's, so I rolled over in bed and grabbed my jeans off the floor. I took four hundred dollars out of my wallet and gave it to Max.

"Go get something nice and tasteful. No boots or spurs or anything else that might make someone think you're a person of the cows. Let Julie pick it out."

"Well Colin, I..." Max started.

"Don't," I said. "Noise must not happen in this room today."

J. smiled, and putting her hand on the small of Max's back, guided her to the door.

A thought struck me and I reached back into my wallet and got out my Diamond Shamrock card.

"Better take this, too. And be careful. There's humans out there."

## Chapter 58

I went into the bathroom and turned on the hot water in the shower. Then went and lay down on the bed while I waited for the hot water to come up. I dozed off and slept all afternoon and at some point a dream stole quietly upon me.

I was in a small mountain village, surrounded by evergreens and boulders. It was high enough to be just below the tree-line, and though it was late summer, the cold air stung my face while I walked, and I could smell smoke from someone's fire.

A stream flowed down one side of the path and collected in a pool at the edge of the village, where a bridge made of rough-hewn stone crossed it. Suddenly, a wounded elk burst out of the trees and onto the path in front of me. It was bleeding from the shoulder and struggled to stay on its feet. At first the animal's wound didn't seem all that bad, but as it moved, the wound tore open more and the blood coursed down its side and onto the ground, turning the pale dust to mud.

Some children from the town came to me. The oldest boy was carrying an old rifle. Marching stiffly up to me, gave it to me. The children waited expectantly.

The elk was standing still in the road but as I began to walk towards it stepped into the stream and was swept down to the pool by the bridge. I ran down to the water's edge and waited for it to surface. Minutes passed, but finally the elk dragged itself to the other side of the pool and lay down.

I walked across the bridge, and tried to make the children wait for me, but instead they followed. There were no sounds except the water and the labored breathing of the stag. The children joined hands and made a half-moon shape behind me with me in the center. I stepped closer to the animal that lay on the ground, watching me. I raised the rifle and aimed carefully to shoot the elk through the head, but as the gun went off, it exploded in my hands, and as the fire surged through my skull I knew I'd been blinded forever.

The children were giggling when they left me and I crawled in circles, trying to get back to the village. All I could find, though, was the still warm carcass of the elk, and I curled next to it as close as I could for warmth. Because though I couldn't see it, I could feel the coming of the night.

## Chapter 59

I woke up and was afraid to open my eyes for several minutes. When I finally did, I had to squint against the late afternoon sun that glowed against the wall, the color of molten steel. The room was hot and muggy and I'd sweated clean through my clothes. Even the sheets were wet. I decided it was time to get up and about.

I suddenly remembered the shower was still going and I walked to the bathroom and opened the door. Clouds of steam billowed out and as it cleared I saw that I had managed to steam the wall paper off the walls. It lay in a great, rubbery mass on the floor and hung in foot wide strips from the ceiling. It looked like a brain tumor. I called room service and told them there was a problem with my room and to bring up a bottle of Advil and two hamburgers. I told them to put it on my Diamond Shamrock card. They said they would have to wait for a couple of hours before I could change rooms, if that was okay and I said it was.

After eating half a bottle of Advil and half of a hamburger I went on into the bathroom where I rolled the wallpaper up into a huge ball, showered and shaved, got dressed and waited for J. and Max. It didn't take long.

They came up and banged on the door for me to let them in so they could show off Max's new things. J. must have added some to the money I gave Max, because she had about three new outfits, and as per with J., they were sharp. How a game warden from Arizona ever got that kind of taste in clothes, particularly women's, was beyond me.

After I'd seen everything, J. suggested to Max that she go get ready for the tour. J. stayed in my room.

"Here's your card back. We filled the car up and bought a camera, but paid cash. Thanks anyway."

"Why didn't you use the card?"

"No reason," J. said.

"Okay, whatever," I said. "Well, I saw what she got, what'd you get?"

"Just a hair comb. Found it at an antique store."

"That all?"

"Well, the lady said it had belonged to Priscilla," J. said.

"Surely you don't believe that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'd have bought it anyway. Hang on." J. walked into the bathroom, flipped on the light and yelled "Holy shit!" She stuck her head out the door. "Colin?"

"Max looks pretty good," I said. "Jealous?"

"What happened?"

"I left the shower on too long."

"You were in the shower long enough to steam the paper off the walls?"

"Of course not. I turned the shower on and fell asleep. Now, are you jealous?"

"Of what? I think you're right."

"I wonder who she might be dressing up for?"

"Stop right there. I know she was in here with you the other night," J. said and looked off.

Things seemed to be headed that way again.

"Boy was she. She was definitely here the other night. All here." I laughed and added one more "Whew!"

"You know she isn't just another college slut, Colin," J. said with anger rising in her voice. "Case you hadn't noticed."

"Well, I've noticed a lot of things about Max, but that's not one of them," I said lightly. I whistled a few bars of "Love Me Tender." J. started grinding her teeth together and flexing the muscles in her jaws, while this huge vein swelled up through the make-up on her forehead so large that I could see it pumping with blood.

"Yeah, like what, you little son-of-a-bitch?"

"That she wants one us of badly," I said and waited for four or five seconds.

"And it ain't me."

J. took this in. "Come again?"

"Ain't me."

"Oh. Well, umm, well what was she doin' in here for three hours the other night then?"

"Crying her eyes out over you, mostly. Is that a song title?" "I think so."

"Well if it isn't, it ought to be."

"I haven't done anything to make her cry," J. said.

"No?"

"No. Nothing. Have I?"

"Oh, only make her think that she's on the verge of becoming a raging lesbian-- present company excepted of course. Can't see why the forced reevaluation of something as unimportant as one's sexual orientation, or reorientation, should bother her."

"I'm not gay," J. said absent mindedly.

"Well, she isn't either, she just thinks she is. What are you gonna do, anyway? Are you gonna tell her?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because she'd think it pretty odd for me to confess that I'm really a man and then dress up like you-know-who and go to Graceland."

I cleared my throat politely.

"Yeah, we can't have that," I said.

J. didn't bother to reply; instead she just looked off, sort of towards the window, but not at anything. Maybe the fact that something as seemingly inconsequential as dress can wreak havoc on the lives of people we don't even know had her occupied.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"I think it's my fault."

"I'm glad that's settled."

You can always count on me not to take the blame.



## Chapter 60

Max came down to the room, dressed in a tailored jacket and skirt, and I about fell out of my chair. Twenty-five years old or I'm Cotton Mather. While J. and I had been talking she'd managed to slip into the salon that the hotel ran and told the lady to make her look gorgeous. And that's just what she did.

The stylist had cut off about four inches of hair, and worked a few other minor miracles that left Max with one of those bouncy cuts that seem to be impervious to wind, water, or other acts of God and man. While her hair was drying they'd thrown in a free manicure and redid her make-up. J. was good, but the woman downstairs was plugged into a higher source.

J. and I just stared at her until she started to get nervous.

"What? What's got all over you two?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. You look fantastic," I said. I meant it.

I think J. was struggling with some kind of personal crisis along the lines of wishing *she* looked that good and trying not to drag Max down to her bedroom. Not that Max would've put up much of a fight.

I decided to intervene. "Julie you best get dressed. You can find Max and me at the bar, sipping expensive champagne and looking *tres chic*."

J. left with nary a whimper, and Max turned to me.

"I'll go to the bar with you, but I done already told you. It's Julie I want. I'm through with men."

I took her by the arm. "Of course you are."

"Well?"

"No one's ever accused me of being a man."

## Chapter 61

J. met us at the bar in forty-five minutes, dressed like Pricilla Beaulieu Presley, 1965. Specifically, a sporty, knit, baby-doll style mini-dress in buttercup yellow, opaque tights, and white patent platform pumps. Accentuating this madness she had a white vinyl clutch with a yellow daisy--or maybe a sunflower--clasp, white kid gloves and cat-eye glasses. She'd even redone her make-up. High eyebrows, false black lashes, wide eyes with kohl eyeliner, pancake and powder to provide contrast, (technical data courtesy of J. herself) beige lipstick and a jet black Ann-Margaret bombshell 'do with all kinds of falls and hairpieces. Her new comb held everything in place.

Problem was, Max and I were the only ones who knew who she looked like.

## Chapter 62

On the way across town a familiar question detached itself from the rest.

"Since we're so close now, tell me what it is that you've got to do when you get to Graceland. You said that when the time came, you'd tell me. I've driven you across six different states, through rainstorms and droughts, ruined weddings and bars. Max set my stepfather's car on fire. I've had recurring nightmares and used my Diamond Shamrock card so much the numbers are almost worn off. In short, it's time."

"No it isn't," J. said.

## Chapter 63

We finally got to Graceland and, regardless of anything else I may have to say about it, I have to concede one point-for a private residence that has five people buried prominently in the back yard, it's about as tasteful as it can be.

I paid for all our tickets, then we boarded a bus that took our tour group all the way across the street. I guess, given where we were, it was a fairly normal crowd, which I broke into two categories, vacationers, like myself and weirdo's, like J. and the Dominos Pizza delivery man who said he "moonlighted as an Elvis impersonator and was waiting for that break from the Man." Also included in our group was reporter from *The National Enquirer*. She came in talking about free speech and the freedom of the press and how she was the Chief Subordinate in Charge of the Elvis Files at the *Enquirer*. All of this was intended to place her as the Elvis Expert in our group, but looking around, I could tell there were few believers. Some of the more gullible took to her, though, and began asking her about recent Elvis sightings at laundromats and supermarket openings. J. was mad at her because neither she nor anyone else had started screaming "Priscilla!" and begging for autographs when we boarded the bus.

I toyed with the idea of a subgroup comprised of people who resisted immediate categorization, but scrapped it. There weren't that many of them anyway.

On the outside, Graceland wasn't what I expected. It should have been a big southern plantation style house, surrounded by miles of yard. Instead, it was a fairly

modest two-story church that Elvis had remodeled. It was fancy and well built, but wouldn't have made a guest-house in my neighborhood back home. It was placed in the middle of a landscaped fourteen-acre lot, that was a soothing contrast to the rest of the area. Liquor stores, used car lots, run-down houses and a couple of burned-out restaurants were everywhere else.

Not so the inside. The interior decorator of Graceland must have been from the same school as the one who'd done the Alamo-style whorehouse back in Arizona. The interior got stranger the deeper into the heart of the house we went. J. and Max were enraptured, and kept nodding approvingly to each other at various and sundry things that just made me wince. Like the staircase. Both walls and the ceiling had mirrors covering every square inch of them. Narcissism run amok. I had to hold onto the railing just to keep my balance, and I still nearly stepped on some woman's head that I took for a reflection.

The pizza man, J. and the rest of the weirdos liked it though. "When ahhm deliverin' mah pizzas tonight ahhm gonna think a that staircase in homage, man." He really said that.

"Your cabin is two-story, ain't it, Julie?" Max asked. Our tour guide let us leave the dining room and took us into a hall that led to the back of the house. She said it was unfortunate, but that as the house was still a private residence, no one was allowed upstairs, where Elvis' aunt still lived. She said we'd descend the stairs and go visit the TV room, where Elvis had ripped off L.B.J.'s idea of having three television sets side by side so that he could triple his audio/visual intake.

About that time the lady from the *Enquirer* mentioned, in sort of an offhand way, that the real reason no one was allowed upstairs was because Elvis was still alive, but that he was a hopeless drug addict and they kept him locked up in what used to be his old bedroom. She went on to say that he had ballooned to 427 and 3/4 pounds, and that all anyone ever saw of him was one grubby, paw-like hand that snatched his opium-laced pizza from the feed slot in his door. The tour guide bore this patiently and started to lead the group on, but J. said, "Wait a minute."

Then she walked over to reporter and grabbing her by the lapels of her suit, picked her up about four inches off the floor.

"I've been ignoring the stories your filthy trash-magazine's been printing about the King for twelve years. And when I finally get to Graceland, of the one million people who have come through it, I have to get stuck on the one tour that has you on it. I'm only gonna say this once, Elvis died in 1977 in this house and they buried him. End of story. You got that?" The reporter, eyes wide as saucers, nodded yes. J. set her back down to a smattering of applause from the rest of the group.

One of the other women, evidently afraid that she might be next, cleared her throat. "Ma'am?"

J. turned and looked at her.

"I don't, um, you know, really think Elvis is still alive either. But, but the way they say he died... I just don't think the King would've gone like that. I mean..." she trailed off.

"I don't know," J. said. "But my grandfather said that the bravest, fiercest Indian

fighter he ever met died in a rocking chair, so I guess the way you live your life doesn't guarantee the end will justify itself." Several people in the group nodded in agreement. The tour guide reverently said it was time to move out.



## Chapter 64

I was the last person in our group, and as I waited to go down the stairs, I heard a faint rasping noise. My eyes followed the curve of the banister and I looked up to the forbidden rooms. One of the doors was cracked open and by the light of the crystal chandelier I could just make out a watery blue eye, looking down at me. I looked back to our group leader as she and an older woman disappeared down the stairs toward the back of the house, but she was confiscating the old woman's camera and didn't see me. I stepped quickly to the foot of the stairs just as an old woman, who must have been Elvis' aunt ran down the stairs to me.

"Where'd she go?" she asked.

"Who?"

"I thought I saw Priscilla," she said. Then she looked at me and there was something familiar about her smile. "Maybe I'm just a foolish old woman." Then she turned and walked back up the stairs as the person in the room tossed a carefully folded paper airplane to me. It had Elvis' "TCB" and lightning bolt logo drawn on both wings.

She turned at the head of the staircase and watched as it see-sawed back and forth, then fell at my feet.

I scooped it up just as the nasal voice of the tour guide rang out, "Sir, this way, now!" I glanced up the to room, and as I watched, the woman I'd taken to be Elvis' aunt transformed into the old woman from the desert. She smiled at me, made a face at the

tour guide, who evidently couldn't see her, and faded from view. I nodded a furtive "yes," and followed the group downstairs.

## Chapter 65

J. and Max were “oohing” and “ahhing” with the devout at three TV's built into a wall. It dawned, as ideas are wont to do with me, that apart from a fairly sophisticated aerodynamic design, there might be a message on the airplane in my pocket. Evidently the tour guide had decided I was one to watch, and she made it a point to stay close to me. This, added to the surveillance cameras jutting out from behind curtains, through the leaves of plants and everywhere else, made it next to impossible to do anything without it being documented. I decided I'd have to wait.

## Chapter 66

The next circle of hell we visited was the so-called "Jungle Room," named by Lyndon B. Johnson himself, in reaction to the most hideous collection of amateurishly carved furniture I've ever even heard of. Evidently, Elvis thought the name was a compliment, because he took to referring to as the "Jungle Room" himself, and began spending an inordinate amount of time there.

Our tour guide informed us that it only took the King thirty minutes to pick out the wreckage and arrange to have it delivered. Given the amount of time it takes to set up delivery of say, a washing machine, I figured that Elvis probably took about ten minutes in actual selection time, and devoted the rest to convincing the salesman he was really serious about wanting that junk.

The paper plane burned like a live coal in my pocket.

J. and Max were, as the rest, unaware of what had transpired between me and the staircase, particularly the reappearance of the old woman from the desert, and maybe that was for the best.

During the visit to the trophy room, I managed to slip out and was in the process of dragging the communique out of my pocket when J. and Max caught up with me.

"Hey, hon, wher'd ya go?" Max asked.

"Oh, I needed a little air."

"It *is* kinda breathtakin' ain't it? I mean knowin' that Elvis Presley wore them clothes and won them awards, and walked around out here. Maybe he stood right where I am right now."

"Maybe he was wearing some of those clothes and holding a gold record or two while he was doing it," I said. Max laughed and I looked at J.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Well, the trophy room is nice, but I've seen a lot of pictures of it," J. said. "I wanted to look over the grounds. Particularly over there." She motioned to where the graves of Elvis and some of his family had been placed for protection from vandals.

"Your plans don't include that do they?" I heard myself asking. "I mean you didn't bring a shovel or anything?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Still trying to figure out your plans. I was worried that maybe you were going to take Elvis back to Arizona, maybe let the drier climate preserve his body."

"Huh? No, of course not. I may be crazy for Elvis, but I don't want to dig him up and take him home with me," J. said.

"Good. I think there are rules prohibiting that. By the way, did anybody peg who you're impersonating?"

J. looked a little annoyed.

"No. Bunch of hayseeds. You'd think that a lemon-colored smock dress with three huge buttons up the front--something you'd *never* see after 1967--white gloves, cat-eye sunglasses and the rest would tip them off."

"Yeah," Max said. "Not to mention the heavy eye shadow and that black wig. Who'd wear a beehive hairdo these days?"

"And not have ulterior motives, you mean?" I asked. "Just kidding. The comb looks nice. Don't let them not noticing drag you down. Did you see anything strange back there at the house? I mean other than the decor?"

"What's wrong with the uh...what you said," Max said defensively. "Like what?" J. said. "And besides, I bet if your house hadn't been redone since the seventies it'd show its age also."

"Like about the upstairs."

"We didn't go upstairs. Did you?" J. was suddenly very interested.

"Started to, but Ms. Mussolini stopped me."

"Yeah, did you see her take that old woman's camera away and yank the film out?" Max asked sullenly.

"Yeah. Now what about the upstairs?" J. asked.

"I don't know, I thought I saw someone is all."

"Oh no, not you too," Max said. "Julie almost killed that reporter." J. was quiet for a moment and then our tour guide yelled at us that the tour was over and that we could wander around near the graves if we liked, or we could leave.

I started to tell them about the paper airplane and the old woman, but stopped again, though I'm not sure why.

Max said she wanted to go look at the car exhibit, and J. said we'd be over shortly.

We found a bench under a huge oak tree and sat down.

"Did you accomplish what you came to do?"

"Not yet," J. said. "It won't be much longer now."

"What about Max?"

"What about her?"

I said nothing. After a moment J. sighed.

"I don't know. Since my wife took off a couple of years ago I haven't dated all that much."

"Your particular manner of dress might have some bearing on that. Wide Ruin doesn't seem like the kind of place where open-minded women abound."

"I just started dressing like this a year or so ago."

"Is that what made your wife leave? Tired of every time you guys went somewhere being girls night out?"

"I didn't cross-dress before. And actually I thought since there are eight million Elvis impersonators I had a good idea. I showed up at the Rosie's one day—in drag—to see what who I thought were my friends would say about my idea to be a Priscilla Presley impersonator."

"And?"

"Well, you'd think I'd have guessed. They just laughed and acted like I was some sort of freak show."

"Why didn't you just give up? That's what I would've done," I said.

"There's more to you than you think. And there was no way I was going to let them humiliate me into changing, so I started dressing like a woman a lot after that."

“So now you like dressing like a woman?”

“Yeah, I kind of do.”

"Uh-huh... Let's leave that one alone for now and go back to Max. She's starting to get that nervous tint about her."

"Yeah, I know."

"What are you going to tell her. Anything?"

"Well, of course it depends on what happens tonight. After I finish up here."

I knew better than to ask about that so I took a different approach.

"Is something going to happen? Do you expect for you, or something else to change?"

"I don't know what I expect. What about you? You still going to make that visit to see your grandparents?"

"No, I don't think so," I said.

"I think you should."

"I wish I could; I really do," I said. "I only got to see them three or four times before they died."

J. just nodded her head a little. "What was that about going up there, then? Just a lie?"

"Not completely. Their old house is still out there somewhere. I'd planned on trying to find it."

J. changed the subject. It was one of the kindest things she ever did for me. "And the twins?"



"I guess they're waiting for me on the other side of that wall," I said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh, I'll make out, I guess. Maybe shoot both of them. Say I was cleaning my gun."

"You got a gun?"

"Been meaning to get one. Really, I guess my choices are to keep running or to just go back with them. They're really not bad guys. Ralph just likes to act like they're his muscle. Not really much need for that kind in the video rental industry. Before them, he had the real thing, though. I guess it's the same thing that makes accountants buy attack dogs, thinking it'll offer protection they don't need from something they can't name. This guy's name was Patrick, of all things. Big Irish guy that Ralph recruited right out of prison. He got so bad that everyone was afraid to go to work, so we finally had to get him sent back to jail. We still hear from him occasionally. Death threats, that sort of thing."

"Video rentals. That really is what your father does?"

"Stepfather. Yeah, nationwide chain. That and play gangster. He wants to turn it into a real stepfather, stepson business."

"What's your Mom do?"

"Valium, mostly. And golf at the country club."

"Not turning back in Oklahoma *is* going to cause some trouble, huh?"

"Well, I still have an ace-in-the-hole back in Dallas, I guess."

"What?" J. asked.

"A little of Gianfranco's money. It's no fortune, but it'll see me through for four, maybe five years. Surely five years from now I'll have some answers."

"Let's get Max and finish this," J. said.

## Chapter 67

We found Max waiting outside at the car museum, where she immediately pronounced everything inside as junk that she wouldn't steal if she had a gun to her head.

J. asked us to follow her across the street, and back to the wall around Graceland, so we did. Thousands of names, dates, messages to Elvis and other communications were scrawled, scratched, and otherwise recorded on the stones of the retaining wall.

She took out a permanent marker, wrote something on the wall and then told Max to read it. Max did, and then looked at J., stood on her tip-toes and kissed J. on the cheek. When she pulled back, Max had a strange look on her face. J. handed me a disposable camera she'd bought with my Diamond Shamrock card and asked me to photograph them.

After I took the picture, J. motioned me to the wall. She and Max stepped aside.

In neat block letters, J. had written, "Dear Elvis, We dropped by, but you weren't home. I'm sorry we missed you, Julie, Max, and Colin." I stepped back. Then I read it again, just to make sure I hadn't missed something. I hadn't. J. and Max were looking at me expectantly.

"Is that it?" I asked. "We drove 1500 hundred miles for you to write, "sorry we missed you?"

"That's it."

Max shook her head. "Don't you understand?"

"I guess I don't," I shot back. "I was kidnapped so that she could deface a wall. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me."

"He doesn't get it," J. said. "Maybe someday he will."

They took off walking in the direction of the parking lot, holding hands, and as I watched them, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen when they were back in Arizona, beyond the sanctuary of Graceland. I suddenly remembered the airplane in my pocket. I took it out, unfolded it and read the message that was written in a graceful, cursive style lettering, "I'm doin' it my way...", E., P.S., Tell J. she knows how to TCB; that comb was my favorite.

## Chapter 68

Suddenly the logic and correctness of what J. had written unfolded and expanded in my mind exponentially, out like ripples in calm water, and up, tier upon tier, at ever-increasing speed, until it was one undivided whole. I ran to catch them.

## Chapter 69

They were standing off to one side of the parking lot, staring at the Cadillac. The twins, were sitting in it.

"Now what?" J. asked.

"What happened to you?" Max asked me.

I didn't say anything but led them back to the ticket counter at the main building, and asked the girl to call a cab for me. Then I took out a twenty dollar bill and asked her to wait fifteen minutes after we were gone, then to page the two idiots in the pink Cadillac to come to the counter for a message from Colin. Then I got an envelope from her and put the car keys in it. "Give this to them."

"Okay," she said. "Anything else?"

"Tell them I'm at the airport." I gave her the twenty dollars for her troubles and we left.

## Chapter 70

The cab driver was named Francine, and I almost abandoned my entire plan after I saw her. She was that good looking. But, duty beckoned, and I had placed myself on a time table so we got out at the airport. I vowed that in the future I'd take more cabs.

J. and Max were at a complete loss as to what I was doing, but I ignored them and bought two first class tickets to Dallas.

"Here. Take these."

"We'll have to send you some money for them when--"

"Forget it," I said.

Then I gave Max the key to Gianfranco's locker at DFW Airport.

"And this. You'll be interested in what's in the locker. After you guys get to Dallas, you can either fly on to Arizona, hitch-hike, take the bus, or rent a car. If you opt for a car, get unlimited mileage and say you're not leaving Texas."

"What are you going to do?" Max asked.

"Wait for the twins. Can I have a word?" I gestured to J.

We stepped out of earshot of Max.

"I'm just curious. Are you going to tell her or not?"

"She'll figure it out," J. said.

"Y'all are going back to Arizona, right?"

"Yeah, for awhile at least. How can we contact you?"

"You can't. I'll call Joe at Rosie's when I get settled somewhere. You can get my number from him."

"Promise?"

"Probably."

"Can I trust you?"

"Hell no," I said.

"Fair enough. Look, I--"

"Don't. I had a good time. For the most part. Now if you'll excuse me, here comes my ride.

About that time I heard a familiar pair of voices.

"Hey, you!" Gino and Guido shouted. They ran toward us, simultaneously grinning and slapping each other on the back. J. started forward, but I caught her arm.

"It's time for me to take care of them," I said. They ran up and stopped. Gino, or maybe it was Guido, said, "We've got you now!"

"Shut-up," I said. They looked at each other for support. "I think you boys are in for some hard times."

"What'd you mean?" one of them asked.

"Y'all burned Gianfranco's Mercedes," I said grimly. A moment of shocked silence was observed by most. This changed.

"It wasn't us," they wailed in unison.

"Who then?"

"Somebody else! It got stolen--"



Max excused herself to go the restroom. I told her to wait.

"What do you think Gianfranco's going to think?" I asked.

"He knows you did it," they said.

"But I saw y'all do it," I said. I looked over at J. who was smiling sardonically at the twins. I looked back at them. "I think he'll see it my way," I said. "It's easier to fire two screw-ups than one stepson."

The twins looked genuinely terrified. Now that I had their attention, I lightened up a bit. A good ruler knows when to be generous. "Go out and wait for me in the Cadillac. We've got to take this car to some boys in Arkansas. Then, we'll catch the Amtrak to Dallas. Try not to attract my attention and maybe I'll work something out so you don't have to take the blame."

They started for the door. "Guido. Gino," I yelled after them. They stopped and turned around. "Back seat."

J. and Max started laughing.

"You look different," Max said to me.

"Yeah," J. said. "Yeah."

"This is for you," I said, handing the folded note to J. "But I want you to wait until I'm gone to read it."

"Okay," she said.

"You really takin' that Caddy back to them boys in Arkansas? How you gonna find 'em?" Max asked.

"Oh, I thought I'd just take it to the barbecue joint and leave it there. That guy's uncle probably has an extra set of keys. If he doesn't, it's high time he got one made."

"Well, it's your car..." Max trailed off.

"No, I guess it really isn't," I said. "That's the problem."

J. nodded her head. "This trip did you more than good than you realize. More than you may ever realize."

I shrugged my shoulders and before we said good-bye I gave them the Diamond Shamrock card.

"Use it in good health and with abandon," I said. "If it ever gets cancelled, you'll know something happened to me."

"Thanks," J. said. "We will."

I walked away from them then, towards the exit of the Memphis Airport that led to the parking lot where I knew the twins were waiting patiently in the back of the '59 Cadillac Coupe de Ville. I got to the automatic glass doors of the exit, which opened, and stepped out into the afternoon sunlight.

I turned around and looked back toward the airport, where hundreds of people were bustling about, trying to catch flights, find loved ones, or do any of a thousand other things. I could see Max with a happy, shy smile on her face, and I saw J., standing in the middle of it all, towering over the rest, big as a myth.

Then the glass doors hissed together as if by magic, and I was left standing alone, looking at my reflection .

## CIBOLA

Jim Gibson sat in the narrow bar of the Midland/Odessa and sipped his fourth Jack Daniel's in a row. With the late summer thermals it had been a throat catching--though short--bumpy flight from Dallas and he'd slammed down five highballs on the way. It was something of a record for what amounted to little more than a commuter flight, he thought, but he would have exceeded even that total if the stewardess had been more attentive to his wants and less worried about his "needs."

Just a few feet from the bar's entrance, people swarmed by speaking a mixture of English and Spanish, most smoking in clear violation of the posted signs prohibiting such activity. Ashtrays were overflowing, the carpet was worn, and the dingy bar smelled slightly of spilled beer and rancid meat. From the dust streaked windows to the faded gate signs to the tacky gift shop, the whole airport looked shabby, felt gloomy. It matched his mood.

The bartender, a sturdy, peroxide blonde in a skirt two sizes too small brought him another round on his signal, though she frowned slightly at his yet-unfinished previous drink. He was running a tab, but slid a single bill across the counter toward her anyway. There goes another dollar he thought, as she fingered it toward her and smiled briefly at him. He had tipped her the same way for each drink she brought him. What the hell, he thought. It's only money.

Only money, Jim thought. Always only money. The root of all evil. And at the moment, he faced yet another crisis. In a way, this trip was supposed to get him "away from it all," buy him some time to think--that's what Mike had promised him, anyway--but it was hard to think when he knew that if he didn't come up with a hundred

grand by the end of the month, he would be out on his ass, his business ruined, and any hope he had of salvaging his marriage gone.

He finished his old drink with a gulp and took up the new one. For a moment, he thought of Carissa, his daughter. Her ten-year-old face swam in the mirror across from him. Cheryl would screw him in the divorce, he knew that. But among all the "things" she said she'd keep she'd also said she would keep Carissa from him forever. That was one promise she'd made him that he believed, and he didn't believe he could handle that. He was sure, though, that a couple of days hunting quail in Mexico wouldn't go very far toward solving his problems.

But then, he thought with a wry smile at his reflection, this probably wasn't helping either. He tipped his glass in a mock toast to himself. It was annoying that he couldn't even get a decent buzz any more. Nowadays, about all he felt was tired.

"A hundred grand," he muttered, and the bartender moved toward him.

"What?" she asked. "You ready again? Already?" He shook his head. "I said 'a hundred grand.' Hell, I used to hear my old man talk about losing that much on a single deal without taking so much as a dramatic pause."

She cocked her head and looked at him. "You okay?"

"What's it look like?" Jim asked, then laughed. "I'm perfect. You wouldn't think a hotshot like me would have trouble raising a hundred grand would you?"

"If you're talking a hundred thousand dollars, I guess I'm the wrong person to ask," she said. "I got about that much in debt, though."

"Well, bring me another round and I'll give you-another dollar, sweetheart. Bwana Bob's late."

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"Jim?" Mike's voice brought him back to awareness. He glanced at the clock over the bar. He'd been sitting there nearly two hours.

"Yeah," he said. "Mike." He fixed a smile on his face and shook his head slightly to clear the sour mash fog as he greeted Mike Treadwell, Redneck Entrepreneur Extraordinaire. "You're late."

"Sorry. Last minute bullshit at the office. Can't hire decent help anymore."

"Wanna drink?" Jim gave the bartender a fingerwave. "No," Mike said, staring into Jim's eyes. "Not here anyway. Shit, they get five prices for a highball."

"Four," Jim corrected. "I'm on the volume discount plan." The bartender approached.

"He paid up?"

She frowned and shook her head slightly, and Jim wondered if he'd said something or offended her in some way. He reached for his wallet, but Mike was quicker and put his hand out. "On me, ol' buddy." He flipped a credit card onto the bar.

Jim's face darkened. "I'm not so far gone I can't cover my own tab," he barked in Mike's face. He knocked the credit card to the floor and pulled a fifty from his wallet. He laid it carefully on the bar, smoothing it out with his fingertips in almost a caress. "Keep the change," he said to her. Her eyebrows shot up, but Jim ignored her, grabbed his tote and turned away. "Piss on it," he muttered. "It's only money."

They started out to the parking lot. Dry, desert heat hit them like a wall when the glass doors opened, and Jim stopped dead in the doorway. Mike looked at him curiously.

"Just getting a last feeling for the cold," he said, weaving slightly. "You know, sometimes I think air conditioning is a rich man's hobby."

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Mike Treadwell was the consummate redneck, all right, Jim thought as they bumped along in Mike's Range Rover. He'd hit the oil patch at precisely the right time, made a fortune, then sold out. Since then, he'd been buying up desert plots in the Davis Mountains, converting them to country club estates, and selling them to rich assholes in Dallas and Houston.

"It's amazing," Mike said to him over the CD player's blast of Country and Western's Greatest Hits. "All you got to do is put in a swimming pool and a golf course, and people fall all over themselves trying to give you money so they can come out here twice a year and fight the snakes and coyotes for a little peace."

"It looks to me like they're getting more than a little piece," Jim commented. Mike had given him a cook's tour of one of his estate developments, "Apache Acres," and Jim wasn't sure he'd ever seen so many beautiful women covered by so little fabric in his life. Even on the golf course, the uniform of the day seemed to be shorts, sports bras and jewelry. Few of the women he'd seen wore much else.

The men, on the other hand, were older, fatter, and uglier than average. It was pretty clear what they wanted to escape from, and who they wanted to escape with.

"It's really not what you think," Mike said. "Lots of them are trophy wives, sure. But some even have kids with the guys they're married to." Mike laughed and shook his head.

Jim let it drop. He didn't want Mike to see how depressed he was. He also didn't want Mike to know just how deep his troubles ran. They had pulled into a grocery/liquor store and stocked up on beer and food and Jim took the opportunity to lay in a sufficient amount of whiskey. He had a silver pint flask--a gift from Cheryl before she decided he had a "drinking problem"--tucked away in his hip pocket, and an at-the-moment mostly

full, quart bottle of Jack Daniels made regular trips from between his legs to his lips. He had passed on the chance to eat before they left town, and had declined all offers to stop along the way. He felt no hunger, just an abiding desire to go to sleep.

"How long till we get there?"

"Five hours, give or take. Depends on traffic at the border," Mike smiled. "Guess we should stop for breakfast before we cross."

"Forget it," Jim said. "I'm okay till I need to piss." Mike frowned at him, but then tried another smile. "Buddy, you're going to love this," he said. "Time of your life."

"Yeah, buddy," Jim muttered and took another swig of whiskey.

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Mike had been trying to talk Jim into taking this hunting trip for over ten years, since they had been roommates in college. A native West Texan, Mike had grown up roaming the Chihuahua Desert that extended from Aguas Calientes in north central Mexico all the way up past Roswell, New Mexico, traversing Texas across what Coronado named the Llano Estacado. The story was that the Spanish explorer had his men drive wooden stakes in the plains to guide them back, so empty and vast, flat and inhospitable was the terrain. But another, more likely story, was that the ubiquitous sotol cacti that pockmarked the region with their single spires pointed to some unknown point in the sky gave the region its romantic name. The reason the story was more likely, Mike explained, was that apart from the scraggly mesquites and an occasional cottonwood parked along a dry arroyo, there wasn't enough wood around to cut anything bigger than a toothpick from.

Jim didn't reply to Mike's impromptu travelogue. He'd heard all this before. But this time, Mike's pleadings for Jim to take a few days and come out to join him had worked.

"You need to shoot something, man," he said when he was last in Dallas on a sales trip. He was giving slide presentations about his new resort properties at an investment seminar arranged by the Galleria and Neiman-Marcus.

"Every now and then, a guy just has to exercise his hostilities, and I can't think of a more productive way than to slaughter a bunch of Mexican quail."

Jim sat there in the posh bar, sipped his drink, and examined him. Mike was six-three, black-headed, blue-eyed, and easy in faded jeans and a khaki shirt, custom knee-high bullhide boots and a plain leather vest. Here, he had been talking to men whose wardrobes cost more than a new Lincoln, and he was selling them luxury hunks of worthless desert.

For his part, Jim wore an eight hundred-dollar suit, hundred dollar braces, fifty-dollar tie, eighty-dollar shirt, and a pair of Italian loafers that cost roughly the down payment on one of Mike's estates. And he was failing.

But he had done everything right: B.A., followed by an MBA, then an internship with one of the most prestigious firms on Wall Street. He joined the right clubs, met the right people, got himself in with the right company, then started out on his own. It was textbook, and his father was thrilled. At least he was thrilled enough to leave Jim out of the Will. Three quarters of the old man's estate went to charity, and Mike's step-mother--actually step-mothers three through six--fought over the scraps.

At the time, Jim didn't mind. He was making it on his own, and he was more or less glad not to have the tax problems.

Mike, on the other hand, took a degree in anthropology, of all things. He spent his summers knocking around the oil patch trailering a small herd of goats--he called them his "waste management crew"--from site to site and doing other odd jobs. That, and



worry more about how far he could spit tobacco juice than he ever did about the stock market or IRS regulations.

Jim married Cheryl, a leggy debutante, S.M.U. cheerleader, bought a half-million dollar house in the Park Cities, had two affairs and one daughter, slaved to make his business work as well as his father's had, gave Cheryl her own personal tennis pro--whom she promoted to lover--kept his eye out for the new car model changes, worried about interest rates, had boxes at the symphony, the opera, and the theater, and overextended himself to the point that, if they demanded cash, he would have trouble paying his dry-cleaning bill.

Mike lived in a mobile home, drank Pearl beer, and entertained a seemingly endless string of young women, none of whom ever seemed to take him seriously, and all of whom seemed to have a good time. He liked the worst of country music, and, since making his pile, only worked when he felt like it. Worse yet, to Jim's way of thinking, was that Mike still had his goats and loaned them to anyone who wanted them for trash clean up and most people still paid him. Mike couldn't not make money. The Range Rover, though, told Jim that Mike had plenty salted away. These babies don't come cheap, he thought, coming back to the present. He took another drink and wished he had the courage to ask Mike if he wanted to make some immediate investments.

The thought sobered him quicker than the whiskey could hit him, though. He tried to remember what he ever liked about Mike. Nothing came to mind. At the moment, he decided, he was learning to hate him, and the last thing he wanted to do was confess his failure to a man who--in the kind of world Jim could believe in--should be living under a bridge and repainting his "will work for food" sign.

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They crossed the border at Ojinaga just before dawn; the narrow bridge guarded by four sleepy guards who barely glanced at them. By contrast, the vigilant eyes of the U.S. Border patrol had been on them every time they encountered one of the lime green vehicles, and overhead, small planes zoomed in and out of the mountains, keeping watch for illegals and, Jim supposed, for drug smugglers.

They continued to drive through the desert, heading roughly southwest down an unpaved road toward hazy mountains that brightened as the sun rose. Jim realized that he hadn't eaten since he left Dallas, but he wasn't hungry at all. His stomach was numb, and his head lolled on his neck. He fell asleep.

When he awoke they had stopped. Mike wasn't in the truck and Jim took a look around. An adobe hut surrounded by scrawny chickens and emaciated goats was parked next to the now almost imperceptible road. A short, swarthy man dressed completely in what appeared to be white, cotton pajamas was standing beside it, chatting with Mike. They were eating something. Jim decided he needed to eat, also, and he stepped out. A small dog, somewhat resembling an English Spaniel, darted between his legs, causing him to trip and almost fall down. Jim cursed and kicked at the dog.

"This is Ramon," Mike said, laughing at his friend's sleepy clumsiness. "Ramon Cortez. He pointed at Jim. "Se llama Jim Gibson."

Ramon turned heavy sleepy eyes toward Jim. "Senor Jaime Gibson," he said. "Mucho gusto, señor."

Jim nodded. Mike stepped forward and handed out a crumpled pile of aluminum foil, which Jim was disgusted to discover contained a corn tortilla wrapped around some kind of cold refried bean and something combination. He nibbled on it briefly, then put it down, where the dog sniffed it and walked away. "Good move, Rover," Jim muttered.

"Ramon here is the best guide in northern Mexico," Mike bragged while Jim stumbled back to the Range Rover and found his whiskey bottle. To his dismay it was more than three-quarters gone, but he tilted it up and took a long swallow. It burned horribly in his dry mouth, making him gag.

"Hey, buddy," Mike said, coming up and holding out a bottle of water. "Try this. You want me to boil up some coffee?"

Jim gave him a narrow look, then softened, took the bottle and pretended to drink, though he merely washed out his mouth. "I'm okay," he said. "Hair of the dog and all that."

Mike shook his head and half grinned. Ramon shuffled over to them. Jim noticed that he wore truck-tire sandals. His feet were flat and splaytoed, like an Indian's. On a string tied to his rope-belt a large, greasy sombrero dangled. He didn't look like he had the full use of his faculties, Jim thought. At best, he didn't look as if he could even afford to buy one of the rangy goats that stood staring at the men.

"Where the hell'd he come from?" Jim asked, looking around for someplace he could piss. It seemed that anywhere would do. The morning sky was stark and cloudless, and the yellow plains surrounding them were empty. Although it was still early, Jim felt the heat already building. He was sweating, and he definitely had to piss.

Mike grinned. "Hell if I know. He picks up his mail and messages in Villa Cuna, but that's miles from here. I just meet him here when I want to go hunting. He owns all this."

"He owns all this," Jim repeated.

"Yeah, everything you see" Mike said. "Well, everything but the mountains."

Jim looked around dubiously. He didn't see one square foot of anything worth owning anywhere in sight. "Good for him."

"He's a great guide," Mike went on. "I've gotten javelina, antelope, I even shot at a panther once. He says he'll take me after jaguar one of these days."

Ramon smiled a crooked, broken-toothed smile. "Si," he confirmed. "Hay muchas jaguar in las montanas. Verdad. "

"Donde vive?" Mike asked him. Ramon shrugged. "Cibola," he said.

"Cibola?" Jim repeated the name as a question.

"Yeah, Seven Cities of Gold. Coronado thought--"

"I took American history," Jim said irritably. Mike shrugged.

"Senor Miguel," Ramon said, glancing up toward the sky. "Necesitos ir. Vamonos.

"Right," Mike said, and he went immediately to the driver's side and got in. Jim returned to his passenger seat and reached around to begin making room among the camping gear for the Mexican guide. To his surprise, however, Ramon tossed the dog onto the roof of the vehicle and climbed up after him.

"Where the hell's he going?" Jim asked, after Mike didn't say anything.

"He likes to ride up top," Mike shrugged.

Jim opened his bottle and took another drink. The roof of the vehicle made a strangely musical protest and buckled slightly as Ramon and the dog settled on it. Jim sighed. "Got any more of that Mescan breakfast?"

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"I'll take Ramon with me," Mike said, handing Jim a shotgun and a box of shells. "He wouldn't do you any good anyway. You don't speak Spanish. You can take the dog."

"Does he speak English?" Jim asked, but Mike only laughed in reply.

"Just head over that way," he pointed with his own weapon. You'll hit a dry wash about a hundred, maybe hundred-fifty yards out. Follow it to the south and we'll link up with you at the southern base of that mesa over there."

"Which way's south?" Jim asked. He looked up. The sky was almost yellow with heat. The sun was directly overhead.

Mike frowned, and Jim sensed his friend's tolerance and good humor was wearing thin. He pointed again toward the mesa. "Just follow the dog," he said evenly. "Kill a couple a hundred of something--preferably quail or something else edible--and we'll come back here, make camp, and have a feast tonight. Ramon's also a great cook."

Jim looked dubiously at the Mexican, who was busily tying a cord around a canteen and loading himself up with extra shells and the other accoutrements of a hunting trek. He then let his eyes fall onto the shiny double-barrelled shotgun. It was an old Purdey with delicate checkering on the stock and gold tips on the twin hammers. It belongs in a collection, Jim thought. It was just like Mike to own a valuable antique and use it in some way that would devalue it.

He pulled the shells out of the box and dropped them into one oversized pocket of his borrowed hunting jacket. In the other pocket the remainder of the whiskey weighed him down, and the flask rode in his hip pocket.

"The way it works," Mike explained, "is that we'll flush them toward each other. I'll move down the mesa base, and they'll probably take to the arroyo. You'll be coming up the other end, and--wham! We'll have 'em caught in one hell of a crossfire. Should bag a couple dozen apiece without trying at all."

"Just how long does all this take?" Jim asked, surveying the distance with no recognition of how far it might be or in which direction he might actually be going.

"If we're lucky, all day," Mike said. "If it goes okay, we should link up about five or six o'clock."

"You mean," Jim glanced at his watch, "I'm supposed to wander around out here by myself all day?"

"That's Mexican hunting, man," Mike said with exaggerated enthusiasm. Then he added in a more serious tone. "This is what you came out here for, remember?"

Jim nodded uncertainly, removed the whiskey bottle, and took a sip.

"Jim, lay off the booze," Mike said irritably.

Jim's face darkened immediately, but Mike put out a hand in apology. "Sorry. Don't mean to ride you. I just don't want you to get blasted out here and shoot one of us by accident."

"If I shoot somebody," Jim said in a cheerful voice, "it won't be an accident." He then forced a wide smile, recapped the whiskey bottle and put it in the truck. He left the flask in his hip pocket, though, and it gave him comfort as he stalked off through the salt sage and prickly pear, vaguely in the direction Mike had pointed out.

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In an hour, he was lost and completely exhausted. Foolishly, he had brought no hat, carried no water, and had nothing more nourishing on him than a forgotten half-pack of breath mints, which he ate quickly. The shotgun weighed heavily in his hands, and sweat ran down his forehead and under his sunglasses, into his eyes. The dog had found several coveys of quail, but he was too hot, too distracted to get off a shot. On the last two, though, he felt guilty enough to go running after them, utterly confusing the dog and carrying him, he guessed, farther and farther away from the dry wash Mike had mentioned.

Finally, the animal seemed to decide that this was no working day, and he ranged all around Jim, sniffing and pissing on any plant more than four feet high. Jim stalked after him, pausing now and then to sip lightly from the flask, wipe his forehead and sunglasses, and then to move on, hoping that he would stumble into the elusive route sooner or later.

The sun remained too high overhead for him to get a fix on its progress, and he was dismayed to learn that any powers of dead reckoning he might ever have possessed were gone. He was hot, tired, itchy, and, he realized with a little satisfaction, more than marginally drunk. He was also angry, with himself for agreeing to come on this absurd trip in the first place, and also with Mike, for not preparing him properly for the desert.

From time to time, he heard the distant booms of Mike's and Ramon's shotguns echoing across the desert floor, and he felt more irritable and more guilty, but he didn't know what else to do but stagger on, trying to avoid the spiny cacti all around him and to keep an eye out for rattlesnakes, scorpions, and other dangerous creatures that commonly inhabited the desert.

As he walked over a short rise of ground that revealed the mesa's distance to be apparently no shorter than before, a single quail shot up from behind a barrel cactus directly in front of him. He jerked the gun up and fired twice, missing the bird.

"Instinct shooter," he said in response to the echo of the weapon's explosion when it came back to him from the emptiness of the plains. "That's me, all right. Can't even waste a six-ounce bird."

He broke the weapon open, extracted the empty casings, and dropped them on the ground. Something about polluting even so ugly an environment as this pricked his mind, but he didn't pick up the discards. "Mexico," he said aloud. "Whole damn place is a trash

heap anyway." He replaced the two spent rounds, pulled the hammers to half-cock and moved on.

His throat burned and his eyes itched. His teeth felt coated with gummy slime. He took another sip of whiskey, mindful that the small flask would soon be empty, and stumbled on after the dog, which was now several dozen yards ahead of him.

He wandered around for another hour and a half, stopping only to take small sips of the fiery liquid, which only seemed to aggravate his thirst, and to wipe his face with a sodden handkerchief. He gave brief thanks that, at least, he had worn a pair of Mike's hiking boots instead of the more fashionable and expensive cross trainers he had brought for the trip. Thorns, stickers, and an indescribable assortment of other dangerous and painful looking spikes and spines protruded from the boots' vamp and were stuck in the laces.

He looked around but could see nothing but mesquite, sotol, and salt sage, marked here and there by the scraggly and low hanging twisted branches of the desert cottonwood. Nothing offered anything resembling shade. There was only sand, rock, and brush, all surrounding him in monotonous abandon. He had seen no more quail, and he noticed that there had been no more shooting from Mike and Ramon.

Briefly, he thought of the Spanish Conquistadors. Pictures of them in their heavy armor lugging huge blunderbusses and long iron-tipped lances rose before him. No a/c back then, he thought. No lightweight cotton, no custom designed hiking boots, no TV, no stereo tape players, no cold beer...nothing. Just a bunch of hostile Indians leading them down the old primrose path with promises of fantastic riches just over the horizon. Bunch of psycho Indians with arrows and tomahawks, all ready to kill and scalp the poor white man just because he was trying to make an honest dollar. "Damn fools," he said watching a buzzard riding the high thermals, but he wasn't sure if he was talking about the Spanish



conquerors or the Pueblos, Navajos and Comanche who opposed them. He was too hot and tired to think about it.

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In another half hour, annoyance gave way to self pity. He felt helpless and completely lost. He decided that in another hour, he'd start firing his shotgun at one minute intervals, hoping they could take a reading off the noise and find him. He knew Mike would be disappointed in him, but he couldn't help it. He wasn't a hunter. He wasn't an outdoorsman of any sort. He wasn't even a businessman, and whatever therapy this trip was supposed to provide had long since been wasted. To Jim, the whole outing simply underscored his own inadequacy and made him feel more hopeless than he had before he came out here.

Finally, as if it were mocking him with its obvious presence, the arroyo gaped before him. It was a deep ditch, maybe fifteen feet down from the rough-cut bank in places. He almost fell into it, so suddenly did it gash through the emptiness of the plain. Jim thought it looked like a good place for a flash flood, if it ever rained in this country. He half slid, half climbed down the sandy side and sat in the shade of the cutbank and drank again from the flask. He dimly realized that he hadn't seen the dog in a while, but it suddenly came bounding up the arroyo and sat panting in front of him, blinking in the sun.

"Wonder you haven't been snake bit," Jim said to the animal, which cocked its head and scooted away from him when he spoke. "But I guess it's too hot even for snakes."

The dog waited next to him for a while, then began to range around once more, sniffing and pissing on everything in sight.

Jim was amazed that the animal had any moisture left inside him at all. He was no longer sweating much, and his shirt and trousers were dry and white with salt from his own perspiration. It was marginally cooler in the shade of the arroyo wall, and he began to feel a little better.

His attention to the dog wavered a bit, until the dog suddenly froze on point, looking down the arroyo about forty yards or so, where a bend in the ditch obscured Jim's sight. He stood up, and then he heard voices, indistinct and low. Mike, he thought, with a qualm of guilt mixed with relief. He pulled the shotgun up, anticipating a flurry of birds rising in advance of his approaching companions. At least he wanted to appear capable of following some of Mike's instructions.

"Hope they saved me some water," he thought aloud, suddenly happy at the prospect of companionship. The dog didn't move but continued his stance. "And some food, hey boy? I won't tell them you took the day off if you won't tell them I was lost."

All he could think of was making his way back to the truck, climbing inside and falling asleep, then getting back to Midland, where he planned to take the red-eye back to Dallas. Screw Mike, he thought. This just isn't my thing. I've got problems to deal with.

He waited, and the voices became louder more distinct. His neck and face were hot with sunburn, and his throat was now constricting and threatening to choke him in anticipation of getting some water.

Two men lugging an apparently heavy suitcase between them rounded the bend and stopped suddenly. They dropped the case and stood, their arms dangling by their sides. They seemed astonished to find an armed man blocking their path.

Jim was stunned not to see Mike and Ramon. For a moment he froze, uncertain of what to say or do. He identified them as Mexican immediately, and he recalled with a

twinge of insecurity that here, he was the alien--albeit a legal one--and that he was practically holding a gun on them.

He dropped the barrel of the weapon, smiled at them. "Hi," he called. "Hello." His voice sounded thin and tinny to his ears, and his throat was scratchy. Impossibly, his mouth felt drier than it did before.

The men continued to look at him, squinting into the sun, trying to identify him.

"Hello," Jim repeated.

"Buenos tardes," one replied. He was tall and skinny, dressed in dirty khakis and a stained white tee-shirt. His hair was long and gathered into a pony tail and tied by a soiled bandanna. He had on a pair of black high top U.S. Keds, the kind Jim remembered wearing when he was a boy. "Como esta?"

Jim nodded like an idiot, and the man smiled and bombarded him with a string of questions in rapid Spanish. He had no idea what the man was saying, although he seemed friendly enough. He took German and Japanese in college--languages of business, his advisor assured him--but he spoke neither well enough to even order coffee in a restaurant. Suddenly a Spanish phrase came to his mind, and he decided to try it. Saying anything is better than nothing, he thought. "Que tal?" he said, and smiled.

The two men exchanged confused looks. Finally the other one, who was shorter and fatter and wore greasy blue jeans, worn rough-out boots, and a torn plaid shirt grinned at him. "Nada," he said, opening his hands. "que pasa con usted?" Jim continued to grin at them, and the two looked at each other again and laughed.

The skinny one then turned serious. "Soy mexicano," he said. "Quien es? La migra?"

The tone in his voice seemed threatening to Jim, who decided his pretense of understanding Spanish was the wrong tack.

"Look," he said. "My name's Jim Gibson--from Dallas."

"Dallas," the fat one repeated, nodding and smiling. "Ah, Southfork? J. R.--bang bang."

"Right," Jim nodded vigorously. "I'm down here with Mike Treadwell. You know Mike Treadwell? Senor Miguel Treadwell? This is his hunting lease."

"Hunting?" the fat one asked. He pronounced it "haunting."

"Right," Jim said, now feeling sweat he had thought was gone from within him trailing down his underarms. "Quail. We're hunting quail. Small birds. To eat." God, he thought, I must sound like a complete fool. "I'm lost" he said at last. "I'm just plain lost."

The skinny one looked at him and repeated the word, "lost." Then, the two of them began speaking rapidly to each other in Spanish. It quickly escalated into an argument of some kind, and Jim felt as if he had somehow been whisked out of sight. They were oblivious to him. The dog walked up and idly peed on their suitcase, but neither of them paid him any attention.

Jim decided that they were illegals, traveling from somewhere in the interior, intent on crossing the border. They didn't look dangerous, and they were probably more frightened than he was to find some stranger in such a remote area. He reached for the flask, but then thought better of it. If he took a drink, he would have to offer them one. That might not be a good idea, and he wasn't sure he wanted to be that close to them anyway.

The argument continued and became more animated. The skinny one kept kicking the ground, raising small clouds of yellow dust. The fat one pointed at Jim from time to time and spoke rapidly, although he never looked at him.

They looked different from any Mexicans Jim had seen before, although his experience had been pretty much limited to Dallas and an occasional trip to Acapulco or

some other resort area. They were obviously poor, dirty, hungry. They also tended to look him straight in the eye when they looked at him at all. There was none of the automatic deference he'd become accustomed to finding when he'd met people of Mexican descent before.

"Look," he said, interrupting the argument, which seemed to be going nowhere except possibly toward a violent conclusion. "If you'll just go ask Mike Treadwell, he'll tell you what I'm doing down here. Or, if you like, I can just go on--"

"Don't know Mike Treadwell," the skinny one said. "Don't know you, neither."

Jim stepped back a half step. "You speak English," he said, shocked.

"Sure." The skinny one smiled. "What you think? We're nothing but a couple of dumb greasers?"

"No," Jim said too loudly. "Of course, not. You just scared me, that's all."

"You scared the shit outta us, man. No shit. What you doing with that gun, man?" He nodded to Jim's shotgun. "That's a pretty nice gun." The fat one nodded in agreement.

"Uh--" Jim glanced down at the shotgun. "Hunting. Like I said. This is Mike Treadwell's lease." Neither man moved or changed expression. "My name's Jim Gibson. I'm just visiting from Dallas."

The two men looked at each other briefly. "I'm Juan," the skinny one said. "This is Fernando."

"Good to meet you," Jim said stupidly. He felt like he was a participant in an elaborate practical joke he didn't understand.

"Mucho gusto," Fernando said. "What you said was the name of your friend Treadwell?"

"Mike," Jim said. "And I'm Jim."

"Miguel y Jaime," Juan explained. Fernando nodded, then laughed. Juan looked at Jim. "We know a Jaime--a Jim--one time. He disappeared." They laughed again. Jim suddenly felt desperate for a drink. He didn't know what was happening, but he didn't like it.

"Well," he said after a beat. "That's too bad. Hope you find him."

"Ain' nobody gonna fin' him, man," Fernando said with a scowl. "Ain' you gonna fin' him, neither. You maybe lookin' for him?"

"Me?" Jim said. His grip on the shotgun was suddenly slippery, but he didn't want to move. "I'm hunting. Birds. Quail. See?" Jim's heart was pounding so violently it sounded like a rattle in his ears.

Fernando studied him and glanced down at the dog. "Entiendo," he said. "Bueno."

For a long moment nothing more was said. Jim could hear the buzzing of insects all around him. Sweat leaked from under his arms and hairline. The sun seemed to bore right through his skull.

"Can you tell me if this is south?" He pointed the barrel of the shotgun past them, taking the opportunity to tighten his grip on the weapon. His hands were awash with sweat, but something inside him prompted him to bring the hammers back to full cock. If they noticed, they didn't show it.

"Sur," Juan asked Fernando with a huge belly laugh. Then he turned to Jim.

"Right, man, you south. Way south."

Jim nodded. "I'm supposed to meet Mike. Senor Treadwell, and the owner--of the lease. Senor..." suddenly he couldn't remember Ramon's last name. "Senor Ramon," he finished, hoping that they wouldn't know the difference. Their faces remained blank. "Mike Treadwell," Jim repeated. "And Ramon." Still no reaction. "Miguel," he pronounced uncertainly. "Senor Miguel Treadwell."

"He mexicano, this Miguel?" Juan asked at last.

"Uh...no," Jim said. "He's from Odessa. Or actually from Fort Davis, now. He said for me to go south."

"Well," Juan smiled. "We can see you ain't no mexicano. We can see you ain't goin' north. I guess you heard that all us mexicanos wants to go north."

Jim didn't know how to reply, so he stood still, felt more sweat covering his body, and looked over their heads.

"Yeah, well," he said at last to break the silence. "I guess I better get on. Maybe try to scare up some birds. It's getting late." The men remained where they were, impassive and watching him, and he tried to whistle for the dog. His mouth was too dry to permit it, though, and he settled for snapping his fingers quickly and stepping to one side, preparing to walk past them and give them as wide a berth as possible.

The dog trotted up to him with a wagging tail and lolling tongue. Jim looked down, saw the animal jerk its head suddenly, and from the corner of his eye, he saw a blur of movement from the pair.

Without thinking, he yanked the shotgun up fired. He was off balance, and the gun's recoil knocked him down and backwards, but as he fell he saw Fernando lifted off of his feet, as if jerked by a rope. He landed in a patch of prickly pear and rolled over.

Jim scrambled to the twisted rubble of a dead mesquite tree and wrapped his body around it. He pushed the gun out and pointed it toward where the men had been standing, but Juan was out of sight. He saw Fernando rolling back and forth on top of the cactus. A bloody, ragged hole stretched across the middle of his plaid shirt, and a pool of blood was forming beneath him. His face was mashed down into the yellow dust, and chalky clouds rose from his breathing.

"Hey, man," Juan yelled from his hiding place. "What you want to go an' shoot Fernando for? What he ever did to you?"

A sick feeling of guilt swam over Jim's whole body. He wanted to vomit. He pulled himself up, slightly, but he still couldn't spot Juan. God, he thought, I've just shot a man in Mexico. I'll never get out of here.

He started to go up on one knee and opened his mouth to say something to Juan, but before he could move or speak, the flat pop of a pistol stung his ears, and a bullet slammed into the rotting trunk of the mesquite tree. He flung himself down and brought the shotgun up again.

"No!" he yelled. "What are you doin'? I'm not going to shoot at you."

"Tell that to Fernando, man," Juan's voice came back to him. "You blew his guts out, man. Why?"

"He pulled a gun on me," Jim yelled back, realizing suddenly it was true. He was gasping for breath. He felt feverish.

"That was me. I got the gun, man," Juan yelled. He confirmed this by firing again. This time the bullet whined in ricochet off the rocks along the arroyo wall. Jim buried his head in the dirt.

Fernando cried out, tried to roll over. He couldn't move. Jim squirmed down into the sandy dirt beneath him. He was desperate for water, but all he had was the flask. He pulled it out, unscrewed the cap, and poured whiskey down his throat. All day he'd nursed a fine buzz, he thought. This drink, though, seared like the first one he had had in years. It hit him his stomach like a fist, then it started to burn.

He wanted to run, but knew that would be suicide. He needed a diversion, or darkness. He looked around for the dog, but it had disappeared. His watch told him it was after two, but he had no idea how long it would be before the sun went down. He



wondered if Mike heard the shots, if he was coming, if he would walk right into an ambush. Shit, he thought. This is just fine.

"Jim," Juan called out. "What you say we just forget about all this? What you say we just get up an' walk outta here? Like it never happened, man. You know?"

Jim took another drink, swallowed hard. "Sounds good to me," he yelled back. "You first."

"You think I'm crazy, man? You just want me to stand up so you can blow me away."

"It was an accident," Jim said. "I thought you were pulling guns on me."

"We was, man," Juan confessed. "That was the plan. Fernando wanted that shotgun."

"Well, he got it, didn't he?" Jim said.

Juan was quiet for a moment. "What you say, man? Let's just get up an' go. You go first."

"And you'll kill me," Jim said.

"Why would I?" Juan argued.

"Your friend. I shot him, remember?"

"He ain't my friend, man. We do a little jobs together now and then." Jim said nothing. "Hey, Jim, he ain't no friend of mine. We just work together, you know? You friends with everybodies you work with?"

Jim thought of his former partner and former best friend, Ben Joyce, how Ben spent every Wednesday afternoon in Jim's bed on Jim's wife. Ben was a great guy, shot in the low seventies, maintained a Palm Springs tan, drove a Porsche, and ripped Jim off to the tune of a quarter million. And there wasn't a single thing Jim could do about any of it.

Especially not now. Not if he didn't come up with a hundred grand by the time the bank figured out how broke he was.

His thoughts had brought him full circle, he decided. Now, not only was he in deeper shit than he ever imagined he could find, he also was still worrying about what he was going to do when he got home. "Thanks, Mike," he whispered to the exposed roots of the mesquite tree. "This little vacation was just what I needed."

He glanced up to the sky. He'd been out in the sun for so long that his arms and neck must have second degree burns, he thought. He'd broken his sun glasses in the fall, and dust mixed with sweat into a gritty paste that stung his eyes. He wiped them, but it only made it worse.

He glanced at the flask lying beside him. He'd trade it all, even the hundred grand he didn't have, for a cool drink of water, he thought. He couldn't remember ever wanting anything so badly. He wondered if Juan had any.

"C'mon, Jim," Juan pleaded. "Let's make a deal. We just get up an' go. C'mon. Fernando's dyin', man."

"Why do you care?" Jim argued. "You said you weren't friends."

"We ain't, man," Juan spoke in a patronizing tone. "But I don't want to see him or nobody else die out here neither. He's bleedin' bad, man. You shot the shit outta him. I don't think he can move his legs." Juan thought it over. "'Sides," Juan added. "You don't want to stand no trial for murder in Mexico."

Suddenly it dawned on Jim that these weren't merely two illegals he'd stumbled across on their way north. The gun, the suitcase, the English Juan spoke all finally came together in his mind and pointed to one conclusion: They were drug dealers. They probably had that bag packed with marijuana, or cocaine, or something else that was worth a lot of money. He raised up enough to spot the battered valise. It was oversized,

held together with knotted pieces of rope. A decal advertising the Grand Canyon was on the side, just under a bumpersticker that read "Lubbock or Leave It." Perfect camouflage.

"C'mon, man." Juan's voice rang out once more. "Let's make a deal an' cruise outta here. I got to get Fernando to a doctor."

"Why should I trust you?" Jim asked.

"Why should I trust you?" Juan asked. "Look, man. You got a gun, I got a gun, an' your gun's bigger than my gun. What I got to gain, man? I don' want to wind up like Fernando."

Jim chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "Okay," he said.

"Tell you what, man," Juan said. "I'll count to three an' we both get up at the same time." He paused. "Uno...dos..."

On "tres" Jim stood up. Three explosions erupted from behind a sotol cactus about twenty yards away. Jim's calf exploded in a bloody spray, throwing him backwards and down, slamming him face down into the dust. The other two bullets ricocheted off rocks directly in front of him and shrieked out into the wasteland.

Jim jerked the shotgun up and pulled both triggers. Nothing happened. He must have loosed both barrels into Fernando. He rolled over, broke the gun open, extracted the empties, and fished two fresh shells from his pocket. His fingers twitched uncontrollably and blood coursed from the wound in his leg.

"You son of a bitch!" he yelled.

"Hey," Juan's voice sang back to him. "What you s'pect? You know you never can trust one of us mescans. Hey, man, don't be pissed off. I wasn't tryin' to kill you. I just had to pay you back for Fernando. Let's try it again? This time, no bullshit."

"You stupid-ass greasy Mexican son of a bitch!" Jim screamed. He pulled his belt loose from his trousers and wrapped it around his thigh. The entire leg of his pants was

now saturated with blood. He tightened the belt as much as he could, then poured the remainder of the flask into the hole left by the bullet. There was some slight stinging around the wound, but no other pain. Still, he was panting, gasping for breath. He forced himself to calm down, try to breathe normally. Sweat ran into his eyes, and his hands shook horribly. His stomach cramped and released spasmodically.

"Man, that ain't no way to be," Juan called out. "I mean, how's this look for international relations?"

"You Mexican piece of shit!" Jim yelled.

"Hey, man," Juan responded almost mildly. "You the one who crossed the border. You the one shot first. We was just mindin' our own businesses. There ain't no need to get personal."

Jim adjusted his position so he could see the sotol plant. Juan was completely hidden, but if he rose, he would be in clear view. If he was still there.

"Hey, Fernando?" Juan called. "Hey, amigo. Como estas? Que pasa?"

Fernando made no reply, but Jim could see that he was still breathing. Jim was now utterly convinced that these two were drug dealers. Why else would they want to kill him? What was to be gained? His eyes once more fell on the suitcase. There must be a fortune in contraband in there, he thought, or, and the idea crept quickly to the front of his mind, there was money. Cash. A suitcase that big could hold a half a million, maybe more.

It was all drug money, of course, but that also meant that it couldn't be traced. And there it was, right in the hands of two Mexicans. His for the taking.

He shook off the thoughts. This was crazy. All he wanted was out of here, preferably in one piece and, hopefully, not under arrest.

He rolled to one side and looked at his leg. There was still no pain, surprisingly enough. He wondered if the bullet passed all the way through. He moved his foot. Still no pain. Maybe he got lucky for once, he thought.

Overhead an airliner cut a straight path across the sky. Jim made out the vapor stream--or something--trailing and faintly outlining the wings. The sun was so bright that he could see the shadow of the plane directly underneath it. He pictured the interior of the jet. What was today? Thursday? No, Friday. The whole plane would be filled with weary businessmen--men like himself--their suits rumpled and in need of a cleaning and pressing. Their heads would be bent over their books or laptop computers as they tried to assess the success or failure of the week's efforts. If they were lucky, they might be in line for a raise or a bonus. At least still have a job. If they weren't, they knew that on Monday they might be fired, shit-canned, replaced by someone younger, better looking with more hair, a guy who could make the figures work to his advantage. And all the while these poor slobs fretted and worried, flight attendants would be scurrying up and down the aisles, bringing booze to the losers, club soda to the winners.

Right now, Jim thought with dismay, he'd trade his soul for a plastic cup of warm, flat beer. His tongue felt drier than the dust beneath him, and it seemed to be growing inside his mouth. Dehydration, he thought. That's all I need.

"Hey, Jim," Juan called. "What you doin' over there? Jerkin' off? I got some dirty pictures. All American girls. Wanna see?"

Jim ignored him. The jet was now past the edge of his vision. Too many Fridays, he thought, he had been one of those poor bastards. Too many days he had spent hustling some underaged, smart-assed junior vice president, trying to cut a deal, make an arrangement. He'd spent almost ten years making a whore of himself, just trying to get by. The thought made him angry. If it weren't for Mike and his hairbrained hunting trip, he

thought furiously, he'd be up there right now, worrying about the bank, about the money, about Cheryl and Carissa, about the ruination that was just around the corner. Instead, he was lying here in some third-world dump with a hole in his leg and a dying man--one he shot and probably killed--just a few yards from him.

Thanks, Mike, he thought, again. This little vacation really made a new man out of me.

He looked at his watch, but the crystal was smashed and it had stopped running. "Five thousand dollar watch shot to shit," he thought.

"Hey, Jim" Juan called again. "You still out there, man? I got a little tequila in my bag. Why don't you come over for a drink? Ain't got no lime left, though."

Jim didn't respond, but his thoughts once more centered on the suitcase. He stared at it, wishing he could see inside it. His eyes burned, and he noticed some cactus spines were sticking from the back of his hand. He pulled them out with his teeth. They were salty and sweet at the same time. He found the flask, but it was empty. He pushed it away.

"What you say, man?" Juan called once more. "How about a little drink. We can be friends--amigos--right?" No hard feelin's, right? You an' me, man. We're simpatico, huh?"

Fernando yelled something in Spanish suddenly, and Jim's muscles tensed. He scooted over a few feet and then spotted Juan's leg protruding from behind the sotol. He thought about taking a shot, but was unsure. The distance was considerable, and he was uncertain just how far the shotgun would reach with any effect. There was nothing in it but birdshot. Probably, he thought, if he hadn't been so close and hit Fernando with both barrels, he wouldn't have disabled him.

Juan yelled in Spanish, and his tone was angry, impatient. Jim heard "Jaime" a

couple of times, and he decided Juan was trying to decide if he'd hurt him badly enough to risk coming forward to check. They were arguing suddenly, and Jim was surprised at Fernando's strength. It appeared as if several gallons of blood had leaked out of him to stain the sand beneath the prickly pear where he lay.

A long silence then fell over the arroyo. Jim noticed that flies and ants had found Fernando and were torturing him. He thrashed his head back and forth, but there was something wrong with his arms and legs, apparently, and he couldn't lift them.

Time passed, but Jim had no way of measuring it. The sun didn't seem to move. It beat down on his burned neck and arms. He was growing bored, even sleepy, and he wondered if it had to do with his loss of blood.

He thought about Juan and began to form a picture of the skinny Mexican in his mind. He wished he had a rifle, a big one, the kind the old buffalo hunters used. It would be powerful enough to punch right through those thin cactus fronds, cut right through them and slice old Juan in two. It would make a small hole going in but leave an exit wound the size of a cantaloupe. It would rip through tissue and crush bone, rupture organs, kill. Then it would be adios amigo, Jim thought. Adios greaser. And the suitcase and its contents would be his.

The turn his mind was taking suddenly frightened Jim, and he shook his head. But he couldn't help thinking about the suitcase. What was in it? Drugs, money? Maybe gold or diamonds. Maybe, he thought with an internal smile, it would save his ass, put everything right. Maybe it would be his own personal Cibola. Maybe he could succeed where Coronado had failed. Kill a few Indians--or their descendants--take the goodies for himself. He suddenly realized that his mind was already made up. He was going to take the bag and whatever it contained for himself. The only problem was the still living--and dangerous--Juan. Fernando, he thought vaguely, was already dead. With a deliberate force

of will Jim decided to quit thinking about him and made himself say outloud, "The suitcase is mine."

A brown lizard scurried across the ground about six inches from his face, and he irrationally thought it might give his position away. He moved slowly to his right, found a comfortable spot, and settled down to watch and wait.

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Jim awoke with a start and realized that he'd fallen asleep. He glanced around in a panic, then focused on Juan's leg, which was still visible just to the outside of the sotol. He relaxed and shook his head. Whoever heard of going to sleep during a gunfight? He wondered. How stupid can a person get?

Things seemed to be about the same as before, although there were now shadows in the arroyo, and the air felt cooler. His thirst was still there, but it was less demanding than before. He found a couple of small stones and put them in his mouth. As if in gratitude, saliva began to flow. He wasn't dehydrated after all, he told himself.

He looked at his leg, but the bleeding had stopped. There still was no pain and that worried him. There ought to be pain, he thought. He looked at Fernando, who was lying very still. Only the barest movement of his chest indicated that he was still alive.

Jim thought of all the movies he'd seen, trying to remember anything that might be useful in this situation, but nothing came to mind aside from the phrase, "Hasta la vista, baby." That wasn't much help. He wondered if Juan knew where he was and was still trying to decide if he was capable of shooting back.

He looked up at the sky and thought of rain, promising that if such a miracle would come, he wouldn't mind being in a flash flood. But then, maybe that wasn't such a good idea. If it rained, then whatever was in the suitcase might be ruined, he thought. And, if it rained and flooded, he would have to deal with Juan up close, might have to kill



him with his bare hands as they slid through the mud together. He didn't know if he could do that. It was one thing to hang around and shoot a man from a distance. It was another to try to bash his skull in with a muddy rock.

If it couldn't rain, maybe it would snow and cool him down a bit. With snow, they might parley a bit, maybe find a peaceful way out of this. But no matter what, Jim promised himself, he was leaving with that suitcase. It was his. He had earned it.

He felt the need to sleep coming back over him, and he physically shook his whole body to stave it off. Once was enough, he thought. He had been lucky. All of a sudden, he remembered that when he slept before, he dreamed of water. The temptation to drop off again was overwhelming. It occurred to him that he hadn't had to piss since this whole thing started.

Fernando's unexpected cry filled the arroyo and made Jim jerk, startled and instantly awash in sweat. It was a throaty, tortured yell, and it was followed by an identical, if weaker, version of the same. The man was in agony, Jim decided, and he was close to death.

Overhead, six buzzards hove into view, riding the hot wind and waiting. Fernando saw them and screamed once more.

Before he could gather his thoughts, Jim saw Juan come to his feet behind the sotol. He was still over twenty yards away, but he rose up and started shooting the pistol and charging toward Jim's position. His white T-shirt was stained yellow and black, and his mouth was twisted in a fierce grimace of hatred. The pistol, an automatic, Jim saw, was popping and jumping in his hand as he raced forward, his long hair, loosed from its pony tail, flew raggedly behind him.

The bullets whined off rocks and sand around Jim, but he remained still, not even

flinching when dirt and stone exploded in front of him. The shots were not coming very close to him, and he realized Juan didn't know where he was. He was just hoping to get lucky.

Jim was holding his breath, and he let it out in a long, smooth, exhale that blew dust away from his face. He couldn't believe how calm he felt, or how certain he was of his next move. It came to him naturally, like a long dormant instinct and all he had to do was to follow.

Juan's charge ended as quickly as it began. The pistol was empty before he was anywhere close enough to be sure of Jim's position, and the skinny man stopped and stood still, a sad, defeated look on his face, only five yards away when Jim raised up.

"Hey, man," Jim said, "Don't take it personal."

He fired both barrels and cut Juan completely in two.

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Jim sat and studied a pool of green bile that had come from his stomach and filled the area between his legs. The pain, so long delayed, now filled his wound and seared its way to his hip. "Sciatic nerve," he explained to the still breathing Fernando, who watched Jim's every move with terror-filled eyes.

Finally, gathering his strength, Jim hefted himself up and used the shotgun as a crutch to limp past Juan's gore spattered remains--already covered with flies--over to the suitcase. It was even more battered than it had appeared from a distance.

"What's in here, man?" Jim said, leering at the prostrate man who only stared back in reply. Jim was only vaguely aware that he had adopted Juan's speech patterns. "You got some drugs, maybe?"

He pulled the case upright and fumbled with the ropes that held it. The knots were

tight, so he took a sheath knife off of Fernando and cut them. Fernando watched in detachment, as if from a great distance. Except for his head and eyes, he apparently could not move at all.

The snaps were jammed, but Jim pried them open with the knife, and the case fell apart. Inside was a bundle of clothing, including two three-packs of white tee-shirts: Fruit-of-the-Loom. There were some dirty socks and underwear, a couple of plaid sports shirts, and two pair of reasonably new black Keds high tops.

There also were two loaded clips--for the automatic, Jim guessed--a shaving kit, several oranges and a grapefruit. An address book, a Spanish Bible a half-full bottle of tequila, and four hard-core pornographic magazines completed the inventory.

There was no money. No drugs. Nothing, really, of value. Jim stood looking into the battered case's contents were they spilled out onto the ground and tried to make sense of it. This isn't right, he told himself. This just isn't right.

He had no idea how long he stood there, leaning on the shotgun and staring into the worthless rummage at his feet.

Finally, the buzzing insects and heat of the late afternoon began to register in his mind, and he looked at Fernando, who lay only a few feet away.

"That's it?" he asked. "You were going to kill me over this pile of shit?"

Fernando said nothing, only stared at Jim.

Jim hobbled over to the man, wincing with every step. "Was this what it was all about? Why you tried to kill me?"

Fernando's breathing increased its rate, and his eyes angled up toward the big man standing over him.

"What was it all about?" Jim demanded again. "Why'd you pull that gun on me?"

Fernando sighed, then drew in a ragged breath. His eyes were fixed where the sotol cacti pointed. He didn't seem aware of Jim.

Jim still looked down at Fernando. Ants roamed freely across his body and flies lit on his head and hands. The blood beneath him had dried and was sponged up by the sand, but a fresh flow had begun and was forming a new crust on top of the old.

"Here," Jim said, moving the suitcase to within a few inches from Fernando's fingers. None moved. "is your suitcase. All you have to do is walk away."

He looked up into the sky, which at last seemed to be darkening. "Is that south?" he asked, pointing down the arroyo in the direction from which the men had come.

Fernando didn't reply. "Good," Jim said. "Bueno."

He took a tentative step and tested his wounded leg. It protested fiercely, but he gritted his teeth and stepped out again. It hurt, but it held.

"See you around, amigo," he said. "Drop by the office sometime. I'll buy you a drink." He moved slowly in a deliberate hobble down the arroyo, hoping the dog might reappear or that Mike and Ramon wouldn't be far away. They probably would be, he thought. That's the way his luck was running. But it didn't matter. In spite of his leg, he felt like walking a while, and, he decided, the pain would do him good. The only thing he felt certain of was that it wouldn't kill him.

## COCONINO ESCARPMENT

Cowboy Bob sidles his horse up to the edge of the Coconino Escarpment and peers over the edge of the bluff where a herd of cattle they were chasing has just plunged.

He looks down into the bottom--a little more than three hundred feet below--and takes in the scene. It looks like a buffalo jump.

Two hundred and fifteen head are piled there, quietly assuming the ambient temperature. Or to put it another way, roughly four hundred thousand pounds of grade A beef.

He curses quietly. Cuthbert, his horse, whinnies and stamps one of his hooves. Yes, thinks Cowboy Bob, it's better we go now, and assemble the others.

Cowboy Bob walks the horse slowly back to camp, contemplatively braiding and unbraiding the fringe on his black leather chaps, and thinking about what the other cowboys will say. Mr. Frazer, Cowboy Bob's employer, will not be pleased, nor will Olaf, the foreman.

Olaf personally raised the herd, winnowing out the bad blood and culling the weak until it was the envy of every cattle rancher within 200 miles.

Cowboy Bob rides into camp to find he is the last to arrive. He dismounts and pulls the saddle off of Cuthbert and drapes the saddle blanket over a tree limb to dry. The saddle he stands on its gullet.

He leads Cuthbert to where the other horses are, hobbles him, and gives the gelding some oats. He then slowly approaches the campfire where the others are in repose.

It is early evening and already there is a chill in the Autumn air. Mike, one of the cowboys, speaks first.

"Here he is finall--Bob, what in hell have you done t'yer chaps? You look like one a them faggots down there to New York City or somethin'."

"Did you find the herd?" Olaf asks. Olaf is concerned.

Cowboy Bob takes a deep breath, looks at each in turn and says, "No."

The cook brings Cowboy Bob a plate of red beans and some sourdough bread. Coffee hisses over a primus stove.

"We didn't see hide ner hair of 'em neither," says Melrose, the other cowboy. "I been lookin' all day. I'm startin' ta think mebbe the Goveerrment come in here with one them Stealth-like hellachoppers and swooped 'em off to do secret tests on 'em."

"I looked all day too," Mike asserts, beans and tobacco juice streaming down his chin. "But I don't know nothin' about no secret 'hellachoppers'."

"I stayed in camp, calling and ringing the cowbell," Olaf says mournfully. "All day. They never came."

Cowboy Bob thinks it highly unlikely they ever will.

"I rode all day, northeast along the top of the Coconino Escarpment as you requested," Cowboy Bob says convincingly. "I never saw them." He eats slowly and with great care. He does not spill.

"Well, we done cuvert this whole valley end ta end," Mike says, looking at Olaf. "What you say, Chief?"

"I guess there ain't no need to keep watch tonight," Olaf says, looking at Cowboy Bob. "There's nothing to watch over." He looks up into the night sky. "Tomorrow we'll ride farther west. Maybe they're in the next valley."

Olaf gets up and goes to the wagon and gets his groundsheet out. He spreads it out on the ground, throws a couple of blankets on top, looks at the surrounding countryside, and rings the cowbell, twice.

Almost all of the men strain their ears to listen, as if expecting the dumb brutes to answer. Olaf sighs and climbs under a blanket.

The rest sit up a little longer. Mike fiddles with his pocket knife and eventually cuts himself. Melrose and the cook play checkers, stopping every so often to take sips from a silver flask.

The game continues until they get mad at each other. They eventually wander off to sleep, leaving Cowboy Bob to his thoughts.

Cowboy Bob leans back against his saddle and looks out into the night. Past the circle of firelight, the colors fade from red-orange to neon blue. Frost has begun to form on the leaves of the bushes and the cactus spines. Steam rises off the bigger, darker colored rocks.

His breath smokes in the evening chill.

Cowboy Bob rolls a cigarette, but it is big and lumpy. Rolling cigarettes is something he will have to work on, he decides. He lights it and blows a puff towards the Coconino Escarpment.

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The next day breaks cold, but clear. The cook serves bacon and more sourdough rolls. It is to be a day of searching.

Cowboy Bob chews the stringy bacon and ruminates. He is thinking of when he was in the business world. Those days, though only months removed, hide in his memory like the events of a past incarnation, shadowy and vague.

Melrose comes and sits beside Cowboy Bob, carefully angling his plate so he does not spill its contents. He fails.

"Don't worry none 'bout them cows, Bob," he says. "They'll turn up over yonder in one a those valleys we ain't checked yet. They're all probly wanderin' round askin' each other 'Where'd they go?' and bein' stupid. Like cows tend to do."

Cowboy Bob knows that Melrose has always liked him, though he thinks Melrose is not sure why. Neither is Cowboy Bob.

He flicks some dust off his black shirt and squints into the morning sun. Olaf calls out for everyone to saddle up and head for the next valley, due west, which they do.

They all ride together for an hour or so, talking idly about where they would go if they were lost cows. Cowboy Bob knows where they would go if they were lost cows being chased by him. The air is crisp and heavy with the smell of cedar, leather, and the strong organic odor of the horses as they begin to lather up.

When they reach the valley, Olaf reins in next to Cowboy Bob and tells him to search along to the northeast again. It is the roughest country, and Olaf knows this. He also knows that it was Cowboy Bob who let the herd slip off in the first place.

Cowboy Bob nods his head once and adjusts his black bolero. He thinks of Clint Eastwood in A Fist Full of Dollars and makes a mental note to get a serape. Maybe one made from a Navajo blanket.

As he trots the horse away from the others, Cowboy Bob wishes he could make Cuthbert and himself thin out and stretch to the top of the screen, like Clint Eastwood. He likes the way his new saddle creaks with each step of Cuthbert and his own weight in the stirrups. He likes the way the horse feels springy and elastic beneath him.

When Cowboy Bob is out of sight of the others, he rides around slowly, looking for a good place to stop. After fifteen minutes he finds the kind of place he is looking for.



He looks around, once, and then dismounts. He loosens the cinch on Cuthbert's saddle and ties the reins to a post oak. Then he unrolls a blanket that was tied behind his cante, spreads it out on the ground and sits on it.

He rolls a cigarette--this one a little less lumpy--takes a pack of playing cards out of his shirt pocket, and begins a hand of Solitaire.

Hours pass. Occasionally, Cowboy Bob will look up from his game, back toward the Coconino Escarpment, as if looking for the herd.

Cowboy Bob thinks about the others, riding around in big, lazy circles, looking for something they will never find.

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At camp that night, ten miles farther from the previous night's, an air of annoyed persecution settles over all the men, including Cowboy Bob. Solitaire always leaves him depressed.

The others are more concerned about where the cattle are. Olaf has been crying now and the cook looks around suspiciously, though at no one in particular.

Mike starts playing with his knife, but evidently is struck by a thought and putting it away, looks at his cut. Melrose takes a pint bottle of whiskey out of one of his saddle bags and passes it around.

Cowboy Bob goes out among the rocks. He thinks about the herd, lying at the base of the cliff, carcasses stiffened, eyes clouded in death. He rubs his hand across his eyes and down the side of his face, feeling his three-day beard.

Cowboy Bob used to shave every day, wear expensive suits and Italian shoes. He used to go by the name of Lawrence Bascombe. Now he works for room and board, plus seventy-five dollars a week spending money. He is content this way.

Cowboy Bob takes his wallet out and fishes a business card from it. He doesn't remember whose card it is, and does not read it. He carries it to remind himself of how he hated his job. On the back of the card is scribbled "John. Lunch sometime. Mobile #691-5537." It may have been a client's. The corners of the card are rounded off because of late Cowboy Bob has been using it to clean between his teeth.

Cowboy Bob dozes off and has a dream. He dreams he is downtown in some huge city, riding down a major street. As far as he can see are skyscrapers that march to the horizon and beyond. Off in the distance he can just make out the outline of a mountain.

It is the noon rush and everywhere he looks, people are laughing and pointing at him. As he rides he hears someone playing the same three chords on a guitar, slightly out of tune. He is on a roan horse he's never seen, and as they travel it begins to go lame, slightly at first, then worse and worse until it stops in the middle of an intersection and refuses to go any farther.

Cowboy Bob takes his revolver out of the holster, cocks it and places it at the back of the horse's skull, right between its ears. He pulls the trigger and as the gun bucks in his hand, he tries to jump clear of the falling animal, but one of his feet gets hung up in a stirrup and the horse falls on him, pinning him to the pavement.

Ants begin to crawl out from under manhole covers and sewage drains. As they trickle across the ground towards him, Cowboy Bob looks up, and realizing he'll never make it to the mountain, begins to cry. He wakes up.

There are tears frozen in small rivulets down both his cheeks. Cowboy Bob sits up straighter and wipes them off. His joints are stiff and he thinks he should go to sleep, but he's afraid he'll dream.

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Cowboy Bob returns to camp to find Olaf kneeling by the fire, slowly feeding small sticks into it, and fanning it with his hat. A thick, white smoke rises lazily, but it's not hot enough to break the grip of the cold night air and so it clings close to the ground.

Mike and Melrose wake up coughing and swearing. Olaf glances at them then goes to his bedroll to try to sleep. He does not ring the cowbell.

Cowboy Bob sits by the fire for the rest of the night, watching it slowly fade to ash but doing nothing to replenish it. This is his nature and he accepts it.

He is still thinking about the herd, but now his thoughts run more to the abstract. In the random occurrence of that plunge, he thinks he detects the presence of a twisted logic. He is confident that eventually he will overtake it, or it will overtake him.

He thinks about the city where he once worked, the cars, buses, sidewalks, and the glass buildings that seemed to force their way up through the pavement. He thinks about the people and the dead herd, seeing very little difference. He includes himself in that assessment. His thoughts fade away to sleep.

Olaf nudges him with his boot. It is full morning.

"Coming with us today?"

"Yes. Of course," he says, getting up. Cowboy Bob dusts himself off with one hand and holds a stick in the other. "Where are we going?"

Olaf looks up at the sky and grimaces. "West. They must be farther west than I thought. You sure you checked out the Coconino Escarpment? You sure you looked real hard?"

"I looked for them all day, you know that. I was the last one back to camp. They're probably out there, just over the next hill."

"I hope so," Olaf returns, "I miss the herd."

Cowboy Bob looks away from the startling blue of Olaf's eyes. They remind Cowboy Bob of his grandmother's. He doesn't look back until Olaf is gone.

Mike and Melrose are cinching their saddles up, looking their horses over and not saying anything.

Melrose looks fearfully overhead as a black helicopter, flying high and fast, darts its shadow across the camp.

## FEATHERSTONE

When Mike Stovall gets to the newspaper office he is three hours late. It's been a long time since he's come to work on time and longer since he cared. For months he hasn't tried to avoid his boss, Bob Fleming, who just shakes his head at Mike's apathy. Mike walks slowly and painfully over to his desk and sits down.

Frank Billingsley, the reporter whose desk is closest to Mike's, smiles not unkindly at him and says, "At it again, huh?"

Mike looks at him dully and finally nods his head.

"Yes," he says.

Frank continues to smile but the warmth is gone.

"This is Wednesday, for God's sake." Then he rolls his chair over to where Mike sits and shows him an old photograph, a young Indian man. Mike studies the photograph for a moment and then raises his eyes to Frank's.

"Indian, right?"

"Not just an Indian. This here's a Navajo Indian. He's going to get you back in the ball game," Frank says conspiratorially. Mike looks from Frank, to the picture, and back to Frank.

"Don't want back in the ball game," he says quietly. Frank sighs.

"Yes you do. You just don't know it. And this will help."

Out of some sense of politeness he asks, "Who is he?"

"Daniel Featherstone. About sixty years ago he and his uncle came into town, he would have been sixteen, maybe seventeen, not sure. Anyway, this uncle of his was just out of the prison at Yuma and evidently ran into someone he thought might have helped

convict him. So, he kills the guy, another Indian whose name escapes me--I can get it--and the girl he was with. Now here's where things get foggy."

"Get foggy?" Mike responds.

Frank just looks at him. "Yeah. Anyway, there's some confusion as to whether or not the killing was murder or self defense. 'Course the uncle got hanged outright, on account of his past history. Seems the good folks of this town, felt that the cumulative aspect of it warranted his summary execution."

Mike thinks of the absurdity of it all. He shakes his head in sympathy for the uncle, and for Daniel Featherstone, but stops when his temples begin to throb again.

"Now Featherstone was either in the room when the shooting started, or the first on the scene, nobody knows which. His uncle didn't even try to get out of town, but Featherstone did. And he did. Disappeared right out into the desert and after the hanging was over and all, which--like I said didn't take too long--he showed up back at the Reservation. The sheriff in town didn't even mess with it, on account of Featherstone's age and the fact that they already had a good, clean, motive for the killing. Not to mention a dead Indian he could point to if need be. As far as anyone knows, Featherstone hasn't set foot off the Res since."

Sometimes a little fog helps Mike focus.

"And?" Mike asked.

"And that's fifty, fifty-five miles. You leave now and by the time Bob finds out that choice assignment he gave me was accidentally dropped on your desk, you'll be out there interviewing Featherstone, clearing up a mystery that no one has thought about in more'n a half century and saving the job that supports your sporting life."

"Why is anyone thinking about it now?"

"Because it's a story. Or maybe someone in management heard about from his granddad. Maybe because it's the 90's and we're trying to show how sorry we are for screwing the 'Native Americans' over by digging up shit that's best left alone, who cares?" They look at each other as if for the first time. "Go ask Bob," Frank says finally.

Before Mike can protest, Frank cuts him off.

"I've gotten you out of jail three times in two months. We were friends once. You can do this for me. You still want to give up after this, give up."

Mike sighs, and giving in to the part of him that still breathes, says, "Okay."

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Out past the gas stations and gaudy curio shops and huge billboards that advertise things like "Real Indian Artifacts" and "Genuine Navajo Rugs" Mike gets to the edge of the reservation where he turns off the blacktop and onto the dirt road that leads into it. He drives for a couple of miles without seeing too much of anything, an overturned pick-up, the transmission and axle missing, an abandoned shack with half of the sheet-iron roof torn off, a sign or two.

After another mile or so, the reservation proper comes into view. It is mostly a ramshackle assortment of identical box-shaped houses, rusted cars, empty lots full of trash. Stores. A little girl stands by the side of the road with one fist in her mouth, a naked Barbie doll intended for the Anglo-Saxon market clutched forgotten in the other. Kids, dogs, and people wander around as if in a daze, though some eye him curiously as he drives slowly through.

Mike feels conspicuous and intrusive. He pulls up in front of a store and parks. Looking through the dust that cakes his windshield he reads the cracked and faded sign "Dry Goods."

He gets out and stretches. Everywhere he looks, the people look at him suspiciously making him so self-conscious he has to try to remember how to act normal.

He nods to the group of old men sitting in front of the store.

"Morning," he says. They look at him solemnly, but don't answer. "Fine day," he tries again.

This time, an old man, maybe the oldest, nods his head slightly. "You all know where I might find a man named Daniel Featherstone?" At the mention of Featherstone's name none of the men speak. No one acts as if the name stirs the faintest memory.

"Daniel Featherstone," Mike repeats. "I'd sure like to talk to him." One of the men gets up and goes inside. Mike waits for a moment, to be polite, and then follows him in.

When he steps through the rusted screen door he sees the man talking to a teenaged boy in a gray tee shirt that had been white and faded jeans who nods, looks at Mike and then walks out the back door.

Mike looks around the barren store, at canned goods and brooms, a calendar that advertises a model of Chevrolet car not seen much anymore.

Then he walks over to the other man and says, "You know who he is, don't you?"

"No," the man replies. Mike sighs and crosses the cement floor back outside. He buys a Coke from the machine and leans against the wall, under the shade of the porch roof. It is late September and already there is a slight chill in the air. A few clouds skirt the horizon off to the north and the old men talk about rain and winter.

As he stands there, Mike thinks about Daniel Featherstone, and the killing he may or may not have witnessed years before; he also thinks about the bottle he has in his coat. He wants a little of the whiskey, just to warm himself he thinks, but decides against it.

The sound of a truck laboring up the road breaks his reverie. Mike looks up, disinterestedly, as a battered, sky-blue pick-up drives slowly past.



A weather-beaten old man is at the wheel and he gives Mike a look like he has never seen, seeming at once calculating, ambivalent, and serene.

Mike looks down at his shoe and scuffs his toe across the dirty floor boards of the walk-way. He looks back to where the truck is headed, out towards the desert, just in time to see the boy from the store hop out of the bed and lope behind some houses.

He decides suddenly, intuitively, that the man in the truck is Daniel Featherstone. Mike runs to his car, but in his haste he pumps the gas pedal too many times and floods it. Precious minutes streak past, each an eternity as Daniel Featherstone widens his lead.

The car finally coughs to life in an eruption of black smoke and gas fumes as Mike throws it into gear. He points it in the direction that Daniel Featherstone went and tries to make up with speed what time has taken from him, but the road is heavily rutted and the jarring and bouncing threaten his control of the car.

Mike comes to a sign that marks the edge of the Reservation; still following Daniel Featherstone, he crosses over and back onto Arizona state property.

The road Mike follows becomes harder and harder to see, as if it is seeping back into the desert. Mike comes to a fork in the trail, stops his car, looks down one way and then the other and decides to go to the right.

Fifteen minutes drag by and he comes to where the trail ends at a big flat rock that is about six feet tall. Beer cans and liquor bottles litter the area around it, nothing more. Mike looks around dumbly for a few seconds, as if expecting the old man to appear, and then turns his car around and retraces his course. He drives on and finally comes to where the dirt road ends, and finds Daniel Featherstone's truck.

Mike stops his car, gets out and slowly approaches the vehicle. It is empty. On closer inspection Mike sees that there is a large pool of oil spreading out under the truck

and seeping into the ground--a return of sorts--that is slowly being fed by a steady drip from the engine.

Mike looks down the road and then starts walking. After a few minutes the trail narrows down to a footpath. Mike follows this for a while longer and then it abruptly ends at the edge of a dry river bed.

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Mike looks down the twisted footpath that snakes its way to the bottom of the arroyo. He can't believe the old man has gone down it, but sees no other explanation. He takes the first step and almost falls as loose rocks and sand break loose under his foot.

Night will soon be closing in and he has no illusions about his chances on this trail after dark. He takes out his whiskey and takes a sip. More carefully now, he starts down. The wind is picking up and before he gets below the rim, he takes one last look back towards the north.

Storm clouds are piling up and walking their huge shadows across the desert floor and as they swallow whole chunks of the wilderness Mike has the fleeting delusion that they are coming for him.

The wind turns cold and raw and Mike knows that if he doesn't get to Featherstone quickly so they can get out of there it is going to be a long night for both of them. Mike thinks about Daniel Featherstone and knows that somewhere down below him the old man believes he is running from his past. Mike thinks also that if he can get at least within shouting distance he can explain that he just wants the old man's side of the story; they can go to a diner and drink hot coffee and talk about the past. He thinks that for that matter, they can go to a road house and get drunk and not talk about the past at all. Maybe the future.

Mike looks around. "Anywhere but here," he says to no one. Not even to himself, really.

A low rumble of thunder breaks his thoughts. The storm is closer and now Mike knows they are in more trouble than he'd imagined. Daniel Featherstone probably knows it too, Mike thinks and he tries to walk faster and figures that despite his dissipation, he should still be able to overtake an old man.

A few cold, heavy pellets of rain start to fall now and as they slap against his body Mike hurries on.

He is descending the footpath in a half controlled slide that threatens to pitch him head first to the bottom. He thinks he hears something and stops short, clutching at a scraggly cedar bush.

Mike strains to hear whatever it is, but all that comes to him is the mournful howl of the cold night wind, as it is sucked by thermal invective out of the arroyo and up the path, through the brush, flowing around and over the rocks like an invisible river.

Mike shakes his head as if to clear it and keeps going.

Twenty minutes later, Mike follows the trail down and inching around a boulder in the path finds Daniel Featherstone. The old man is lying back against the dead stump of a fir tree, breathing heavily, trying to catch his breath; his lips are blue. He is watching Mike calmly, the way Mike has seen trapped animals watch: calm, resolute, and sure of the outcome.

"Why did you run?" Mike asks. Daniel Featherstone doesn't answer, but watches every move Mike makes.

"I just wanted your story. Just wanted ..." Mike trails off. Then he looks around. "We've got to get out of here."

The rain begins to come down hard, now with sleet mixed in, and Mike knows he has to do something or that he and Daniel Featherstone could die. He steps closer. The old man tries to move away, but is too weak and only succeeds in rolling over and crawling a couple of feet.

Mike catches him by the ankles and rolls him onto his back and begins to drag him closer to the largest boulder he sees. Mike thinks that maybe they can shelter themselves under the overhang, if it's big enough. Maybe he can build a fire and then go for help. They reach the rock and Mike shoves the old man against it, they sit half facing each other and Mike pulls the bottle out of his coat pocket and offers the liquor. The old man hesitates a moment, and then takes a sip and hands it back to Mike, who does the same and passes it back. Featherstone takes a longer drink this time, then another. They continue this until the whiskey is gone.

It is completely dark now, and lightening is growing more and more violent. Each bolt seems bigger than the last and Mike watches in drunken interest the savage electricity that arcs from clouds to the ground, rocks and scrub illuminated in stark relief, all of it looking just as artificial and staged as in a movie. The impossible sea green and cobalt blue colored after images only add to this impression.

Periodically Mike also sees Daniel Featherstone, leaning against the boulder, breathing slower, and more steadily, his breath steaming in the chill night air. He thinks this is a good sign, but still wishes he could build a fire and go for help. On the other hand, he thinks, maybe he should just go for more whiskey. The face of the rock is sheer and the rainwater runs down and collects for a moment where they sit before swirling off. Mike finds this captivating.

At some point Mike realizes that Featherstone is shivering uncontrollably, and Mike watches closely, when the lightening permits, at him and for his breath, which as he has feared, slows and then a little while later, stops.

Mike tries to remember the C.P.R. he has read about, though he is not sure if maybe mouth-to-mouth is what he should try. He lays Daniel Featherstone on his back and begins to push violently down on his chest, hoping to get his heart started again.

After the third push Mike hears a faint cracking sound and when he pushes down the fourth time, the bones in Daniel Featherstone's chest sag a little and then give way with a muffled snap he feels more than hears, all the way through his arms and shoulders deep into the pit of his stomach.

Daniel Featherstone's eyes widen in agony and a dense froth of blood tinted saliva erupts out of his mouth and rolls down his cheeks.

Mike springs away in horror and Daniel Featherstone's left leg jerks once, a long, slow, graceful contraction.

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A few hours later Mike leans against a car and takes a deep, ragged breath. His eyes focus on two deputies that struggle up the narrow footpath, trying to counter-balance against the weight and momentum of Daniel Featherstone's corpse as it swings between them.

One of the men looks up and sees Mike, then looks the other direction and spits. When he looks back, Mike can just make out a thin string of tobacco juice trailing from the corner of the man's mouth to his jaw.

He wonders how many more questions he'll have to answer before he is taken to jail. A sheriff approaches him, and without any introduction says, "Okay mister, um,

Tucker, I know you've talked to a lot of folks in the past few hours and I know you've told 'em all about your self, how you're a big shot reporter and all that."

Mike doesn't say anything. The term "big shot" is never one he applies to himself.

The sheriff leans in closer and says, "Have you talked to me about it?"

Mike shakes his head no. The sheriff grins at him.

"I guess you better start," he says.

"Where?" Mike asks weakly.

"Most folks start at the beginning'," the sheriff says. "Easier that way."

"I'm working on a story..."

"Were working on story, I'd say. We can skip that shit," the sheriff says. Mike looks at the sheriff and takes a long drag off his cigarette. His throat is already raw from the cold, wet air and from telling the same story over and over. He exhales and winces.

"I guess Monday's as good a place as any to start," he says.

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When Mike finishes telling what happened, he and the sheriff are the only two left. The sheriff shakes his head.

"Well, that was just fascinating."

"What about Featherstone?" Mike asks. "Does he have any family, next-of-kin? Do they know?"

The sheriff looks at Mike and all for his youth and brashness and inexperience, Mike can tell that there's a good bit of decency in him.

The sheriff looks down at the mud and then back up at Mike, looking him in the eye.

"Featherstone's a name not heard in this country in years, Mr. Tucker. That man that you--" he motions back down to the creek and stops.

Mike hears as well as feels the rumble of floodwaters that now course down what was just a dry ditch a few hours earlier.

"That man you were out here with," the sheriff continues, "was named Willie. Willie Groundwalker."

Mike just looks at him.

"Word from the Res was that he was nothing, just an old drunk, not that that makes this any better."

The sheriff suddenly looks old and tired. He takes his cowboy hat off and slaps some rainwater off it and then puts it back squarely on his head. His confidence--or whatever--seems intact again. He squares his shoulders and addresses Mike.

"Get in your car and leave, Mr. Tucker. That old man would have died like this or in some other way that was just as stupid."

The sheriff spits out of the side of his mouth, shakes some more of the rain off his coat, gets in his truck and leaves Mike standing alone and silent, watching the downpour, which shows no sign of letting up.

## A WOMAN HER AGE

She was pregnant; there was no doubt about it. And Eula Mae Crenshaw knew that at seventy-two and a half, it was going to take more than pickles and ice cream to put things back into perspective.

She thought about it for a day, but the realization that at her age time only seems to drag, had come to her long ago. She called her friends in the Silver Leaves Nursing Home to her small room and explained her predicament.

As was to be expected, Caroline, the widow of a Baptist preacher was irate. Eula Mae liked to tease Caroline by saying that Caroline's husband moved around more in death than he ever had in life. No one knew what she meant by this and she wasn't telling.

Ruby, hands down the best Scrabble player in the home, blushed and said something under her breath; for once her use of big words with obscure meanings seemed appropriate.

But then there was Francine, the retired hairdresser from Duluth who, as usual, took a little more practical point of view.

"What you do hon, is you talk to whoever your um--

"Paramour--" Ruby broke in.

"--boyfriend is," Francine continued as if she'd not been interrupted, "and you explain to him that either he comes up with a little money--"

"Francine!" Caroline exclaimed.

"It's okay," Eula Mae said to Caroline. Then she turned back to Francine. "But it won't work."



"Honey, it'll work. In my line of business I saw it all, but I never saw that not work. Just tell me who it is. I'll drop by and we'll have ourselves a little chat," Francine sat back and folded her hands across her ample stomach.

"Roy Stephens," Eula Mae said, looking at her steadily.

"Okay. Roy Stephens. Now I'll just go and...Did you say Roy *Stephens*?" Francine asked.

"Yes."

"Didn't he just..."

"Yes."

"Oh," Francine said. "Well, seein' as he's gone on to his, um, reward--"

"And I think we all know what that's going to be," Caroline interrupted. Francine ignored her.

"Seein' as he's passed, I guess we need another plan," Francine finished. The rest nodded their heads in agreement. Francine perked up.

"It's a shame though. You ought to see the way those old boys pay up when--"

"Francine! I think that's quite enough," Ruby said. They sat there quietly for a little while longer. Ruby did needlepoint. Francine chewed some gum, occasionally popping it loudly and picked idly at the peeling vinyl chair cushion. An employee of the rest home shuffled past the open door and glanced at them with a dull expressionless look as if he were inspecting cattle. Caroline glared at him. He muttered something under his breath as he moved away.

Eula Mae looked out the dust-streaked window, smiling slightly and thinking about how hard it was going to be to break the news to her son and daughter. She decided she'd let them tell the grandchildren.

"I know, we'll say it's a miracle, sell the story to one of them national magazines, make a million bucks and move to the Bahamas," Francine yelled. "Or one of them damn places."

"Francine, what in blazes are you talking about?" Ruby exclaimed, dropping her needlepoint in her lap.

"What do you mean 'miracle'?" Caroline asked.

"I mean a miracle. Like in the Old Testament. Hell, girl, you were there, you know what I'm talkin' about," Francine said. Caroline drew herself up in her chair.

"I was not 'there' as you put it. I was born in nineteen ought six, and I'd think even an old woman who's chosen to religiously avoid the straight and narrow all her life would know more'n to say something as--"

"Girls, shut-up," Eula Mae said in a tired voice, "I'm going to vomit." And that's just what she did.

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That afternoon, Francine, Caroline, and Ruby were down in the T.V. room, discussing current events. A small, black and white T.V. was placed at one end of the room, tuned to a game show. Periodically, the picture would sort of wobble and drift a little as if the viewer had double vision, or perhaps vertigo.

"I never thought about it, but it seems like if a woman's in her seventies *and* pregnant, she shouldn't have to have the morning sickness," Ruby said. "It's unconscionable."

"That means 'real bad'," Francine said to Caroline in a mock whisper everyone could hear. "I knew you'd be too embarrassed to ask." Caroline glared at her.

"I knew what it meant."

"What are we going to tell Eula Mae to do?" Caroline asked no one in particular.

"I want to know what she was thinking about," Ruby said. "A woman her age. What will people say?"

"They'll say it's a miracle," Francine said.

"Hush," Caroline whispered suddenly, "here she is."

"Hello girls," Eula Mae said, sitting down. "Let me guess the topic." No one spoke.

"I've been thinking it over and I've decided that Francine's right. It is a miracle."

"It's a disgrace, is what it is" Caroline said.

"Well, that too, I guess. But it doesn't have to be all bad."

"What do you mean?" Caroline asked. "How can it not be all bad?" Her Baptist was showing.

"Well, if we call that magazine Francine was talking about they'll pay us, but then they'll be crawlin' all over Silver Leaves, askin' everybody questions, and--"

"You don't want anyone to know. Is that it, honey? You can tell us," Ruby cut in.

"I figure with this bunch of gossips everybody'll know anyway," Eula Mae said looking at them. "If they don't already." They all looked at each other for a moment and then nodded in agreement.

"Well, Eula Mae, it is more interestin' than--"

"Right. But if some national magazine's out here, snapping photographs and talking about money and cover stories, no telling what might happen--"

"It'd be a regular Sodom and Gomorrah," Caroline gasped.

"It's possible," Eula Mae said.

"You think?" Francine asked slyly. "But all wishful thinkin' aside, what're you gonna do?"

"Call Billy Joe Stanton's prayer line and tell him that--"

"That television preacher out to California?" Caroline asked in shock? "Why, he's the Anti-Christ!"

"So?" Francine asked. "Besides, he's handsome. Caroline, tell me. Does it bother you any that the Anti-Christ is kind of good loo--"

"Francine, I think we should stop this right now and see what exactly Eula Mae has in mind," Caroline said, and then put her hands over her ears to block out anything else Francine might say.

"I'm going to call Billy Joe Stanton's prayer line and tell them that on Wednesday, three months ago I was watching his show when a blinding light--"

"That one's been used," Caroline said, momentarily uncovering her ears.

"Hush up, Caroline," Francine said.

"Apostle Paul, Acts 9, verse 3," Caroline shot back.

"That on Wednesday, three months ago, a warm, blinding light enveloped my entire body, and--"

"Anyway I'd a quoted something out of Job," Francine said. "I think it fits this picture better, what with the morning sickness and all."

They all looked at her and then Ruby said, "He preaches Thursdays anyway. Not Wednesdays."

"What do you know about the Bible?" Caroline asked Francine.

"On a Thursday, a warm, blinding blue light--"

"Caroline, I wasn't a hairdresser *all* my life."

"If it was blinding, how'd you know the color?" Ruby asked.

"A warm light of indeterminable color flashed from heaven, blinded me and made me pregnant!" Eula Mae shouted.

Everyone in the T.V. room was staring at Eula Mae. Ruby, Caroline, and even Francine were all fidgeting in their chairs and looking around and turning red.

Eula Mae looked at them coolly and said, "Oh, stop it. Half the people in here don't know whether they're walking or riding. I doubt sitting with me'll ruin your reputations." She paused. "It's not like we're waiting to see who'll get asked to the Homecoming Dance."

Francine laughed at that and the rest smiled.

"Anyway, I came down here because his show is on in a couple of minutes."

Eula Mae got up and went over to change the station, smiled to a couple of the residents she knew and then joined her group. She'd barely had a chance to sit down before the show came on.

"BELIEVE IN JESUS!" thundered across the room from the television, shocking the women into silence. They all looked at the television and were confronted by Billy Joe Stanton, doing a commercial that involved God, the Reliable Used Car Motor Company Inc., and Billy Joe Stanton's show, The Prayer Connection.

According to him, one could make God happy, buy a good used car, and have their wildest prayer fantasies realized, all at the same time. No salesman would call.

Eula Mae turned from the television in disgust and looked down at her worn house slippers. The other women watched her for a moment, and then went back to their conversation. Francine jotted down the prayer line phone number.

"What's Billy Joe Stanton got to do with used cars?"

"Well, I guess those T.V. preachers are all alike," Eula Mae said. "They all say that if you watch their show, have faith and, most importantly, send money, God'll give you whatever you want. I guess I'll just say getting pregnant was what I wanted."

"My head is still reverberating from that television preacher," Ruby said, holding her hand to her forehead. Eula Mae and Francine paid no attention to her, but she continued. "And anyway, what makes you think he'll give us enough money to go to the Bahamas? Or anywhere else for that matter?" She asked.

"I'll tell him that I want to be on his show and spread the Good Word--"

"Billy Joe Stanton ain't--isn't--going to let a pregnant seventy-two year old woman get on his T.V. show and tell America, and anyone else who's listening, that she's in the family way on account of him," Caroline said. "Good Word or no."

"No, I don't think so either," Francine said. "But if you tell him that either he lets you on his show, or you go to the Enquirer or somewhere else he just might. I wrote his phone number down for you, hon."

Eula Mae nodded her head in agreement. An old telephone sat on the grimy, chipped table next to the couch, and as she picked up the soiled receiver and started dialing the number, Caroline reached over and put a warm hand over Eula Mae's.

Eula Mae looked at her and then to the others, who all sat, with flushed and expectant faces, and then back to Caroline who squeezed her hand and nodded. Eula Mae put the receiver carefully back into the cradle.

"A baby," Caroline said with a smile that was at once wistful, mysterious, and more than that, happy, "now that *would* be nice."

## RITUAL

This is the coldest I have ever been. I've placed myself in a plywood box, roughly four feet by four feet. The fact that it is camouflaged to match the surrounding trees and bushes serves only to underscore the ludicrousness of the situation.

The outside temperature is fifteen degrees above zero but seems to drop in direct proportion to the increasing glow of the false dawn as the sun climbs the horizon. In the translucent darkness I can see a low band of clouds spreading in a wide arc that pushes down from the north.

The frigidness of the morning robbed me of the feeling in my fingers first, followed shortly by my feet. A part of me wishes I could go down to the truck and warm up, but I haven't made my kill yet and I know that the warming up, when it comes, will be more painful than the numbness. This is going to be one cold morning.

This is when hunting of any sort seems frivolous, if not outright stupid. McDonald's multiple selections of meat, cheese and egg combinations, all waiting to be washed down with hot coffee, are after all, less than fifty miles away.

But this year I've promised myself something different. After driving through the Panhandle and seeing once again the innumerable cattle of the feedlots I have decided that, except for what I eat in restaurants, I'll only eat meat I take myself. This task has proven much harder than I expected, but it's something I still want.

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I'm sure that this will come as a surprise to some; the actual killing--or reduced to its lowest common denominator, "success" of a hunting trip--is the worst part. I can't speak for what I call "Horn Hunters," individuals whose criteria for making a kill is that

the animal, be it a deer, elk, bear or whatever, is "trophy grade," but dipping your hands in blood should be undertaken with a fair amount of seriousness.

It's human nature to expect more of others than we ourselves are willing to give. This tendency is compounded when it's cross-generational. Take, for instance, our twentieth century perspective on the Anglo-Europeans who settled the west and the fact that it's fashionable this week to dismiss them as greed-driven racists of the "only good Indian is a dead Indian" persuasion. Next week, who knows? Thankfully, that falls into the category of things that take time.

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When Charles Goodnight was establishing himself in the Palo Duro canyon, he encouraged hunters to come in and "reduce" the buffalo herds so that his cattle wouldn't have to compete for the sparse forage. And though it's easy to point fingers, this doesn't make him a bad man.

Soon, orphaned buffalo calves began to appear at the ranch and his wife--in one of the few times she overtly countermanded him--had a special corral built and ordered his cowboys to feed them. So in one of those moments of random irony that are occasionally visited upon us, Charles Goodnight became something of an environmentalist.

The slaughter went on. It took only a few short years to reduce the millions of the once great herds to a scattering of bone--across nearly incalculable miles--sparkling with frost at the base of the Rocky Mountains to where it trailed off, bleached white by the sun beating down on the Staked Plains.



But what I wanted to remember is this. One day some Indians showed up at Goodnight's ranch and asked for one of his buffalo. He told them to leave. They said sure, just give us the animal. So Goodnight let them have one and right in front of his Victorian style house, sitting there in the middle of the wilderness, they chased it down, as countless generations of their people had done before, and killed it. Then they sat there on their horses and watched its blood soak into the sunbaked dirt. And even then, in the late 1880's, with Manifest Destiny and all that that connotes in full flower, Charles Goodnight and his skinny cowboys stood there blinking in the sun and I honestly believe that some of them must have caught a brief glimpse of the enormity of what we'd lost.

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The sun is up now and as I feared, there is just enough haze to keep it from providing any warmth. The wind has been blowing since first light, but now it is steadily increasing. My blind is anchored to the ground by guy wires that--combined with the scrub oak and cedar--moan plaintively in the cold rush of air like an Aeolian harp.

I scan the area around me through a foot and a half by six inch peep hole. There is one in each of the blinds' four sides and they act like a wind funnel, robbing me of all warmth. I'm sitting hunched forward, leaning on my rifle. I call myself looking, but really I'm wishing it was summer and I was sitting by the swimming pool with sweat trickling into my eyes while I surreptitiously watch girls. I try but can't remember what it means to be hot. Summer seems far off and strange as the river Lethe.

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I read once about an anthropologist who was studying a tribe of Inuit on the Bering Strait in Alaska. His attention was caught by a young man of the tribe who had evidently lost his eyesight in some kind of accident. When the anthropologist asked one of the tribesmen about it he was informed that on a seal hunt the man had made a kill and then ridiculed the seal for its weakness. The other hunters in his party then forced him down to the snow and tore his eyes out.

Crazy as it sounds, I think that cuts to the heart of the matter. Though some people consider hunting to be extreme anthropocentrism, and certainly in some cases it is, it's as valid a communion with the wild as any. Clint Eastwood once said that hunting is a strange way to relate to nature. The only response I have to a comment like that is that well, pretending to kill people for a living strikes me as a strange way to relate to art.

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There is a barbed wire fence at the far end of the pasture and it is on the far side of that where the deer materializes. This is another thing you must know about deer, they rarely walk into view; they almost always materialize. One moment you will be looking at a clump of cedar, the next you'll catch the twitch of an ear, a hoof lifted gingerly off the ground, and you suddenly realize that for the past hour you have been blind.

A blur of movement catches my eye. An owl cants silently down the face of the hill, wings held rigid like a jets. It's following a cow path, flying no higher than three feet off the ground. It beats its wings twice, two purposeful strokes whose languor belies their power and disappears around a bend in the trail.

I have hunted here many times, but still don't know how far I am from the far end of the pasture. I slowly raise my Model 70 and look through the scope. I can see the animal a little better, but only those who have spent some time behind a rifle know that a rifle scope is no substitute for binoculars. As it is I can't tell much anything about the deer except that it is in fact a deer, as opposed to a coyote, cow, dog, whatever.

I watch until my eye starts to hurt from staring through the scope. I set the gun down carefully and shut my eyes. I wait a moment and then look back through the scope just in time to see the deer drop its front legs and scoot under the fence. That is all I need to know about this one; it's too young to shoot. Mature deer always spring over fences. They jump like cats jump, flat footed and straight up.

But I keep watching through the scope and think about shooting the deer anyway. With a deer population of over two million, Texas laws governing white tail hunting are almost non-existent. Basically, from November 1 to about the middle of January any deer is legal.

I watch for a while longer, then choose not to shoot. It may be anthropomorphism, but I personally don't like killing young animals, even though life in the wild is nothing like PETA or some other reactionary group like that would have us believe. Something spooks the deer and it runs straight at the fence, bumps down and under on its forelegs and is gone.

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In 1990 two hunters were killed by deer. Both incidents occurred in the first couple of weeks of the season, "the rut," when every mature whitetail buck's hormones run amok and they fight for dominance, to defend their territory and at any other provocation, real or imagined. In the first case the buck charged without warning from heavy cover and gored the man to death. In the second, the hunter watched in amazement as a big buck swam towards him across a deep creek. When the buck made the shore he attacked the man and killed him.

Both are tragic on the one hand; on the other they seem fair.

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I get bored and decide to walk around. There is an arroyo that cuts through the big pasture and I think I'll stalk quietly down its bed, thinking When it and feels right, I'll climb back up into the world.

The watershed for this area is many miles to the north-east of where I am and though I reason it won't happen, I wonder what I'd do in the event of a flash-flood. Looking up the sheer walls of the creek bed I realize there isn't just a whole lot I could do if a wall of cold, muddy water came surging down toward me. Drown maybe.

But no torrent sluices down to take me and I come to a flood plain that hosts a stand of mesquite trees. I walk as slowly and quietly as I can, working my way to the edge of the trees.

The cover is heavy enough so that when I get there it comes as a surprise. I step back into

the trees and wend my way slowly back and forth to the dictates of the growth. Every now and then a jackrabbit will break from cover in long burn that uses up the country. They're particularly hard to ignore because in the dead calm of the morning every sound is amplified ten-fold.

There is a sudden explosion of movement. From the crashing I can tell it's a large animal. I race to the edge of the mesquite stand and make it into the open, about the same time the buck does, a hundred and fifty yards out and gaining ground.

I find him in the cross hairs and touch off a shot. The deer disappears under recoil and I pull the gun back down level, scanning to see if he's down or still running. Nothing.

Chambering another round, I begin to walk as cautiously as before. I find the buck dead, lying in a crumpled heap a few yards beyond where he was when I shot. I nudge him carefully with the tip of my boot, even though his eyes are beginning to skin over.

I examine the animal over and am amazed to find that the bullet entered at the front of his throat, broke his neck and exited beneath his left ear. He must have been looking over his shoulder at me when the bullet struck him. There is simply no other explanation.

Rolling the deer over I take out my skinning knife and think, this is the oldest of rituals.

## SOME KIND OF PARADISE

In Texas, it is a rare place that doesn't get ridiculously hot in the summer. Starting anywhere from early April to May, some places up on the caprock may hold out a bit longer, the nights get shorter, the days clearer, and the temperature builds. Occasionally you will wake to find that a cool front has stolen down from some high place as if with good intentions, but in a way those times just make things worse, like a neighbor who says you don't look as fat as you think you do.

But Texas, like an annoying neighbor, can always be gotten away from, if only for a little while. And, no matter how hot it gets in one place, there's always another that's more bearable. And every year as the heat climbs and the rains stop I start looking to the northwest with ever increasing frequency.

Around the second week of August last year I got a phone call from my friend Evan Voyles. Evan grew up in Austin, took a degree in English from Yale, and then started law school. Happily, all of this happened before I met him. When I stumbled across him we were both living in the west Texas town of Abilene. This was right after the bust in the late 80's and we were losing something like two, sometimes just one and a half, families a week. Abilene was beginning to take on the appearance of a ghost town.

I had a small house to myself on College Street; Evan had a small house too, but shared his with four hundred pairs of custom made cowboy boots he'd collected from all over the Southwest.

In addition to his boot collection, Evan also traded in Navajo blankets, antique firearms, knick-knacks, and old neon signs, the kind you see advertising hotels, department stores--that sort of thing.

Anyway, Evan was calling to see if I could meet him in Santa Fe. Indian Market was that weekend and he was going to have a booth. I told him "No" I had too much going on.

After our conversation, I reflected on my responsibilities around home, books that I wanted to read, the waist high Johnson grass in the back yard that needed to be burned or baled and various things of that ilk. Then I got in my dilapidated, un-airconditioned pickup to run some meaningless errand. The heat inside the vehicle was like some malevolent thing and as soon as I slammed the door my sunglasses fogged up. I looked around at the faded upholstery, the cracked dashboard and thought, "I better get going, get a little breeze in here." After a couple of minutes of driving I felt like a thousand tiny streams had burst forth all over my body.

Sweat dripped stinging into my eyes and heat waves shimmered off the black asphalt like delirium tremens come to point the way. So I just gave up, made an illegal u-turn and headed home.

Later that day, after failing at all the little errands one must undertake to keep the household humming, I picked up a journal article that my mother had mailed to me. It was about the Anasazi Indians, a subject which, truth be told, held very little interest for me. It seemed that all my students that semester had become infatuated with what they called the "New Age Movement" and that the Anasazi figured heavily in that equation. I had read paper after paper on how the Anasazi were a peaceful, cliff dwelling race that mysteriously faded away, leaving only their big houses, or Kivas, and their belongings. That or space aliens took them to live beyond the stars.

As I tossed the paper onto my reading desk the word “cannibal” caught my eye. I sat down and for the next twenty minutes found myself engrossed, pardon the word choice, with the article. It seems that in the late sixties a certain Dr. Turner, a forensic authority, was doing research on human remains taken from Anasazi dwelling places and that under his observation the condition of the bones was freighted with a darker significance. He labeled them “Food Debris” and postulated the theory that some time around 900 A.D. the Anasazi had been infiltrated by a heavily armed band of thugs from Central America. These people imported, among other things, tropical parrots, macaws, and a type of intentional, decorative chipping of teeth. They also imported a taste for human flesh mixed with corn meal, which they called, with appalling candor, “Man corn.” Far from being whisked away on U.F.O.’s or undertaking some other strange exodus, Dr. Turner came up with a different theory; the Anasazi ate themselves out of existence.

It was hot and still in the house so I took a cold shower in the vain hope that it would do some good. I put on a pair of boxer shorts and walked out to the street to check the mail. My neighbor, a big, friendly sort of guy who worked for Wal-Mart was outside too, grilling hamburgers. We looked at each other but didn't wave. A feeling of vague, barely repressed hostility settled between my shoulders.

I looked at the mail: several bills, some magazines, a flyer from Wal-Mart--that place, a postcard advertising oil changes and kidnapped children, and a bounced check notice.

I went in and packed immediately. Chaco Canyon to check up on the lost Anasazi by way of Santa Fe sounded just about right.

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The road trip occupies an almost mythic place in the American psyche. After all, from a certain point of view the North American continent was inhabited by people who felt a need to leave what they knew, hoping for something better. At least different. And we do the same thing today, whether we call it a vacation, outing, or whatever. It all boils down to a need to get away from the regular and look for something better or, once again, different.

Ordinarily, I travel at night. This serves several functions. First, of course, there's that Texas heat I've been bitching about. Second, and peripheral to that when I'm driving long distances, particularly in Texas, I don't like spend all day talking to myself. "The sun hasn't moved in six hours," I might argue or, "Is the sun starting its descent, I, I just don't know!" sometimes just, "How long have I been out here?" I sometimes whisper these comments in a hoarse, plaintive voice and accompany them with a dry rattle in the throat. What can I say? It's silly, but it helps pass the time and that brings me to my last point: there are parts of this state that are just too ugly to comprehend. Taken together in one day they can lead one dangerously close to the abyss.

All in all, the night is best.

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In the 1850's Charles Goodnight left Kentucky and came to Texas hoping for a better life. When he got here he immediately began slaughtering buffalo, running the Indians off their ancestral land, starting the famous JA ranch, fencing in the country, and in general helping start a chain of events that we perversely call "opening up" the range. And, as no good deed goes unpunished, it follows that, naturally, there is a town named for him. And it was just north of Goodnight, Texas that I saw the meteor shower.



The country northwest of Wichita Falls becomes increasingly barren and rough. If what I've read is true, the yearly average rainfall drops off at something like fifteen inches per each fifty miles you travel west, making dry farming all but impossible. Irrigation is an alternative, though a costly one, so most of the land is used for ranching. The towns along highway 287 are sparsely populated as most everyone who is born out there does their best to grow up somewhere else.

And though I'm sure boredom is a constant, it's a good place to see falling stars.

I had the top off my Landcruiser and I caught the first meteor at the outside of my peripheral vision just as it faded away. I drove on awhile, the heat still oppressive even though it had been full dark for three hours. Suddenly, another shot straight across the sky, east to west like God's own semaphore and that seemed to kick the whole thing off.

For the next thirty or forty-five minutes I drove through the dark country-side and craned my neck around watching the meteor shower and trying, sort of as an afterthought, to stay on the road. I ran off the shoulder a couple of times, and almost got ticketed while racing through Clarendon whose street lights, anemic and ineffectual as they were, still hid the sky from me.

When I saw Amarillo glimmering on the horizon I pulled off the road, lay across the hood of the jeep and watched the sky for another hour or two.

And then it all stopped, as abruptly as it had began.

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I crossed into New Mexico about dawn and drove most of the next day trying to recapture the time I'd lost stargazing in Texas. I'd wanted to hit Santa Fe around seven or eight so I could go to this little breakfast place on Guadeloupe that serves Huevos Rancheros mixed with fried

potatoes, jalapenos, corn, black beans, sausage, onions, and a bunch of garlic. It comes sizzling in a heated skillet and they don't have to tell you "Don't touch it, it's hot."

Unfortunately, that didn't happen and I found myself at some mega-truckstop called the "Flying J," staring down on a styrofoam plate at a deep fried and tangled mass of something or other. It had been advertised as "Buffalo Wings" but the words "perimortem mutilation" and "food debris" were uncomfortably ready at hand.

Ten a.m. found me somewhere out in the desert. For the first hour or so after you cross the border, nothing about the country much changes. Eventually though, the elevation begins to mount, traffic becomes more sporadic and you are truly left to your own devices.

Which in my case that morning was that I kept thinking about the Anasazi and the meteor shower of the night before, two things that I don't know much about, and thinking that they were metaphorically a linked. It seemed to me that both had been brief and brilliant, leaving in their passing a transitory beauty, or gift. At any rate, one thing to be said in favor of ignorance is that you find cause for wonder in the damndest places.

I kept going and the air became cooler and I began to see scattered bunches of pronghorn, a few blue quail, and once, a rattlesnake.

A note here about driving in New Mexico, and this can be either a blessing or a curse, there are almost no highway signs. In Texas and some other states there will be signs that say "El Paso 445" or "Highway 377 Two Miles" and the like. "Slow Children Playing," (however that might be construed) that sort of thing. When you are approaching an exit, it will be marked and a sign will inform you what to expect at the other end of that road as well.

As I said though, signs in New Mexico are as sparse as good intentions among the damned and about as useful. When you do find one, perhaps after hours of wandering alone in

bewilderment, it's apt to say "Picnic Area 1 Mile," or something equally useless. Unless, of course, you're goal is to eat a sandwich out on the malpais.

Anyway, only the largest highways, such as Route 66 which cuts east to west from North Carolina to California, are marked with "exit to" signs. Evidently even the New Mexico Department of Transportation couldn't ignore that one. All the rest are marked where they intersect. So if you're driving north and you see an overpass, you have to exit and read the sign that is facing east to figure out if it's a highway you'd care to be on.

But in spite of this I eventually made it to Cline's Corners and from there Santa Fe is only about ninety miles.

I pulled into town about midafternoon. Intermittent pinon smoke drifted like incense on the cool mountain air. A bank clock said the temperature was sixty-eight degrees. After twelve hours on the road it felt and smelled like a paradise.

I drove down to the square, taking in the sights. There were people everywhere, carrying huge shopping bags. Most were dressed in what I'd call *nouveau west*: acid-washed blue jeans, shiny new boots, and designer cowboy hats. Also, of course, there were the local kids hanging out in the park in the middle of the square smoking dope, a few Indian women selling jewelry, and sunflowers ten feet tall with stalks as thick as your wrist and heads that looked like platters. None of this jibed with the history of the place, which seemed to have been brushed aside and swept into the shadows of the mission San Miguel.

I stopped at a red light, nodded to the passersby who rushed up and down the street. They ignored me, but I couldn't really blame them. With the top and doors off my Landcruiser it was easy for them to give me a good, long once over and what they saw wasn't too impressive. I had on a pair of faded out Wrangler jeans with a hole in one knee, my old M.L. Leddy boots that I'd

traded a clasp knife for at a flea market, and a blue chambray shirt I'd sweated through so many times salt ringed the collar and armpits like pond ripples locked in sudden stasis. Wearing that shirt was like hugging Lot's wife after her unfortunate backward glance.

Physically, though, I didn't feel too bad. My joints and back were a little stiff from the drive, but all I needed was a shower, a whiskey, and a steak, in that order.

When the light changed, I shifted out of neutral into first and eased off the clutch. Halfway through the intersection a peroxide blond driving a forest green Range Rover ran the light and almost killed me. As she wheeled on by she instructed me to perform a carnal act upon myself that is anatomically impossible and followed up with a stream of invectives that would have made the Marquis de Sade blush and turn away.

I didn't realize it at the time but this proved to be the general tone of the rest of my time in Santa Fe. I was lectured in bars by surly drunks who could barely slump upright. A waitress at Steaksmyths refused to take my order after I asked why "free roaming range chickens" were "more balanced" at the point of death than say, Bo Pilgrim's. I was just beginning to explain that when my entrée came I would be looking for signs of scalping, bones exhibiting cut marks consistent with dismemberment and pot polish. She fled to the kitchen. When the manager came out and tried to put it all into perspective we came darkly close to blows.

Around noon on the second day I got in my Landcruiser, pointed it south went down to Cline's Corners where I filled the tank and checked the oil. While waiting to enter the highway I suddenly realized that I had a choice to make and that either option was the right one. I could head south back to Texas and falling stars and that long string of night. Or, I could point it

northwest and push on to Chaco Canyon and those other fallen stars. The world seemed boundless.

## CHICKEN SLAYER

This is one way you could spend a Saturday morning: standing knee deep in Johnson grass, shooting chickens. And though I'm fundamentally opposed to killing for the sake of killing, that's pretty much what I'm doing. All in the name of dog training.

Hunting dogs are a weird bunch. Though hunting is bred into them and is about all they know, their vision of it is as a solitary pursuit, a pleasant pastime that, frankly, you're not invited to join.

Which, of course, is where the dog trainer comes in. It's his or her job to convince these muscle bound, high octane beasts to suppress their more pressing desires and hang around with some person who probably doesn't get out more than a five or six times a year, loafing up and down the fence rows, walking the easy ground and, in general, avoiding the brush, woods, briars and other spots that are most conducive to finding wild game.

But hunting, due to some atavistic gene or whatever, is big business and so is dog training. A well bred, well trained, or "finished" in the parlance of those in the know, hunting dog will start at about fifteen hundred dollars. From there the price just goes up.

One of the myriad ways in which this subjugation is achieved is through a form of positive reinforcement. Which is why I'm standing out in a six-acre pasture watching a young boy stuff a Bantam rooster into what I call a "bird launcher."

For the trainer of gun dogs who finds himself with a less than perfect set-up, like say he made a poor choice of parents and didn't inherit a big ranch teeming with quail to train his dogs on, bird launchers are indispensable. A spring loaded device that, in theory at least, is designed to simulate hunting-type situations, they are affordable, portable, and easy to use. Under normal circumstances quail are used. The bird is placed in a paper sleeve that looks suspiciously like a

Chinese take-out box, placed in the launcher and a spring on the device is compressed. A trainer with dog and shotgun then begin to work their way toward the place where the launcher has been hidden. The trainer may or may not know where the launcher is; in any event he relies on the dog to scent the quail and lead him to it. When the dog goes on point, a helper yanks on a long cord and the quail is hurled twenty or thirty feet into the air.

Now, cruel and inhumane as all this sounds it's, for the most part, not all that bad. For starters, no hunting situation prepares you for the quail's sudden acceleration out of the launcher; they attain air speeds that are impossible in the wild. Also, wild quail may flush from anywhere, but they almost always fly straight. With the bird launched variety, you may know from where they're coming, but you never know where they're going. As a result, a good number of them get away. And, on a psychological note, nothing quite prepares you for the sight of quail rocketing ass-first out of a clump of broom weed. I've found myself standing in slack-jawed amazement, my gun a forgotten stick in my hands more than once by this vision.

I have a friend named Dusty Schneider who is a pretty good dog trainer. He's not the best, as all of the dogs I have ever gotten from him had some, shall we say, progress to make in regards to obedience. On the other hand, Dusty tries to train dogs the old-fashioned way, which is to say that he tries to hunt over them a lot and despises shock collars, which, though effective, are misused more often than not. Dusty knows that I have a weak spot for grilled quail and on the occasions that I have helped him with his training, the deal is always the same—any quail I shoot to help train the dogs are killed on the condition that I get to keep and eat them.

On this particular day I had another reason to go, in that I had just gotten a new side by side shotgun and hadn't had spent enough time with it to feel comfortable yet. My old shotgun, a Browning Auto-5, was one that I'd hunted with for almost twenty-five years and which felt almost like an extension of my hands. The new shotgun was a Winchester double barrel "Golden

Quail” edition and was both shorter and lighter than my old semi-automatic. In short, a different piece altogether.

When I got to Dusty’s, I was a little surprised to see a pretty good sized crowd milling around. Families. I parked my truck and walked over to where Dusty stood with a few men, some I’d met; most were strangers.

“Glad you could make it,” Dusty said, extending his hand. I was introduced and we all made the usual comments about the dogs, the weather, on or two of the women, and then Dusty called me aside.

“We’ve got a little, ah, problem.”

The problem, as you’ve no doubt guessed is that Dusty, unable to find quail, had chosen to substitute chickens. I looked at him for a moment, waiting for a punch-line that didn’t come and then asked him why there were so many people, to which he answered that he was giving a demonstration in hopes of selling some bird dogs and maybe picking up a few more to train. I asked him if using chickens was such a good idea, in light of the fact that we were ostensibly training the dogs to hunt quail. What I was really wondering about was the bird launchers. It’s true that there are gaps in my knowledge of physics big enough to sneak an elephant through, but still, I have working knowledge of the basics. Dusty’s bird launchers had, after all, been designed for quail, not the heavier and much bulkier fowl that Dusty had in mind. He dismissed my question with an airiness that I at first mistook for confidence born of experience; I have since come to the realization that what I was wondering about had never crossed his mind.

By now a sizeable crowd had formed, made up in no small part of women and young children. I was increasingly feeling that nothing good could come of this. Dusty was addressing the crowd, introduced me, and made some general comments about the state of hunting and how beneficial a sport it is, fun for the whole family, that sort of thing, and then it was time to begin the demonstration.



I took my position with the dog, a big liver and brown pointer named Skip Again, and he went to work. I have to say that this was the high point of the day, though none of us knew it at the time. Skip Again performed flawlessly. Dusty had taken the chicken some minutes before and carried him around in an elaborate “pattern,” really just a convoluted series of stops and circles at different piles of brush, mesquite, a dry creek-bed, and then had placed him in the launcher, all of this out of sight of Skip who was in a dog box in the bed of Dusty’s truck. The pointer was then released and over the next fifteen minutes focused his considerable talents toward ferreting out the chicken’s hiding place.

Skip Again froze on point, a sight which, for the quail hunter at least, is one of almost indescribable joy. We moved slowly towards a little clump of mesquite branches. I murmured “Steady, Skip, steady, birds Skip, birds...” and so forth at which point Dusty jerked the release cord.

As I explained earlier, this is usually the point at which the Chosen Bird, as my father in one of his stranger Biblical allusions calls quail, will explode from the contraption streaming contrails of feathers and on a rather erratic flight path. Chickens, however, do not.

Chickens, shall we say, rise with considerably less vigor. Imagine drop kicking a medicine ball and you get the idea.

Skip Again had been through this drill before, only with quail, and was wholly unprepared for the strange, whitish apparition that rose lethargically from the mesquite to hover for a moment about four feet off the ground.

In retrospect, it was a causal chain of events that conspired against us on the first chicken, but cast a pallor over the rest of the day nonetheless. Dusty had waited a little too long to release the trap and as a result I was standing much closer than I would have ordinarily been when the chicken made her maiden voyage. I made two, fairly unrelated mistakes; first, I showed up at all,

and second, I accidentally fired both barrels at once. Skip Again's only mistake was in reality his ancestor's fault: they overcame their natural fear of mankind and began to trust our judgment.

There's no delicate way to approach this, so I'll just say it, the chicken exploded in a red spray of feathers and bone matter. All of this proved too much for Skip Again who ran shrieking and howling to hide under the barn.

While we tried to coax the dog from his hiding place, I told Dusty that I didn't think using chickens was such a great idea. We'd only shot one at that point, and I felt that the results had been sufficiently unlovely to indicate that it was one too many. Dusty said he understood, but he had potential clients out there as well as a hundred dollar's worth of chickens he'd bought just for the occasions.

"Besides, you still get to keep what you kill," he said. I began to experience serious misgivings.

All I can say about the rest of the day is that with the new shotgun, my shooting was not accurate as it would otherwise have been and that accounted for the fact that I missed several of the chickens outright. Unfortunately, unlike quail, who would have flown for cover, the chickens I missed the first time ran around in uncontrolled chicken-hysteria, squawking and flapping just out of reach of a dozen pursuers. A few were somehow rounded up and summarily sent through the firing line again.

After an hour or so, the crowd had thinned considerably. There were still a couple of families left; whether they were planning on buying a dog or were just trying to get the facts in order so they could report us to the SPCA, I don't know. The area around the training facility looked like the work of a deranged shotgun-voodoo cult. It was horrible.

I walked over to the pile of dead chickens and looked them over, deciding that this was about as far from the spirit of hunting as I cared to drift. Dusty was standing some distance off, talking to a few men, but he was looking at me. I picked four of the birds up by their feet, walked

over and when I told him that I thought I'd shot enough chickens for one day, even he looked relieved.

I got home and started cleaning the chickens in the back yard. My wife walked out onto the porch, took in the scene and then walked back inside, closing the door softly behind her.

I was getting there, but I still had a ways to go.

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